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# Speaking the part - is black english in the workplace a detriment to climbing the corporate ladder? a sociolinguistic study regarding black english in the workplace

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**SPEAKING THE PART - IS BLACK ENGLISH IN THE WORKPLACE A DETRIMENT  
TO CLIMBING THE CORPORATE LADDER? A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY  
REGARDING BLACK ENGLISH IN THE WORKPLACE**

by

**KANIKA N. JACKSON**

**THESIS**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

**MASTER'S OF ARTS**

2011

MAJOR: COMMUNICATION STUDIES

Approved by:

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Advisor

Date

## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my wonderful and loving husband Omari Jackson for being my biggest supporter during the completion of this project. Without you encouraging and pushing me to not give up, I could not have finished this project. Thank you again for believing in me and not allowing me to succumb to defeat. You are the best! I love you!

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Before acknowledging anyone, I must give thanks to mighty God! For His word says in Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” This has certainly been a test in faith for me, but not giving up and believing fueled my diligence in writing and researching. Next, I would like to acknowledge Dr. Donyale Padgett and Dr. Katheryn Maguire for their great assistance with this study. Without your extremely helpful insight and feedback, I certainly could not have completed such a study. I would also like to acknowledge my study participants for their wonderful insight and time.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Millions of people living in the United States are currently unemployed, forced to work menial dead end jobs, consistently job seeking or are stagnant in their current positions. Included in this group are African Americans. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, African Americans comprise 15.4% of America's unemployed, even though they only make up 12.3% of the overall population of the country. Such statistics suggest African Americans need to possess a high-caliber of professionalism when seeking employment because they are a minority and exhibit less power in the corporate sector. For the job market, professionalism can run the gamut of a number of factors including appearance, timeliness and poise. Also, a very important aspect of professionalism includes having the ability to negotiate communicatively in order to effectively market oneself in the corporate job market (Alim, 2005). By negotiating communicatively, African Americans need to have the ability to speak the language of corporate America – Standard American English (SAE), which is substantiated by Boone (2003) who states that speech behaviors have to be legitimized by another culture before being considered appropriate. In an unpredictable economic climate, African Americans must prepare themselves for the future job market. As a result, minority groups, particularly African Americans unable or unwilling to adapt SAE, which is the dominant form of communication in most corporate workplaces, are possibly impeding their opportunities for employment or promotion.

Quite often, job seekers and even the employed concern themselves with “looking the part,” meaning wearing appropriate attire. However, “speaking the part” is of equal importance. In most professional settings, the need for effective communication is key for “selling yourself” to potential employers, formulating colleague and client relationships as well as promotion within the company (Alim, 2005). The existence of racial/language discrimination as well as

politics concerning the employability of a job seeker are prevalent in today's society. However, the bottom line is that that communicative negotiation is a universal skill needed for corporate-type employment and Black English (BE) speakers are not exempt from this reality.

While BE is a historic custom throughout much of the African American community, some speakers, particularly members of the younger generation, are choosing to use it in mainstream locations such as corporate offices. Such an action reinforces this historic communicative custom and serves as a form of resistance to the dominant structure of corporate America. Some resistance could be expected as Trethewey (1997) indicates wherever there are power relations resistance follows. However, according to Alim (2005), "We must revise our pedagogies to confront the harsh ways of the world we live in" (p. 29).

Furthermore, communicating effectively in the workplace is important in order to accomplish unified goals, objectives and tasks. Additionally, being an effective communicator can lend credence to credibility in any environment, especially corporate America. Moreover, there are laws preventing potential employers from discriminating based on race, age, religion and gender. Yet, the same does not apply for language, which means employers can decide whether or not cultural communication impedes job performance (Sniad, 2001). .

In the United States, SAE is the unofficial language used in business, government and education (Donahue, 1985; Finegan & Rickford, 2004). It is considered "standard" because it is the language everyone is expected to speak in academic and professional settings. Furthermore, it becomes standardized when a set of norms validating its usage become codified and accepted by a speech community, leading to recordings in dictionaries and textbooks (Payne, Downing, & Fleming, 2000). This denotes the need for all working citizens, depending on the setting, to be conversant in SAE in order to conduct most forms of business. This also is the case with

obtaining high-level jobs (Botan & Smitherman, 1991). According to Nixon and Dawson (2002), the American workforce is increasingly changing over the next 20 years. The white-non-Hispanic population is expected to decline from 71 percent to a little over 60 percent. Furthermore, African Americans and Hispanics would be the dominant populations in many of the largest cities in United States (Nixon & Dawson, 2002). The argument is that communication between co-cultures can be problematic due to different assignment of meanings to symbols and misinterpretation (Nixon & Dawson, 2002). This gap in communication can be due to communicative distance between cultural groups. Despite the shift in population demographics, effective communication is a necessity between co-cultures, especially in management positions where new strategies and commitments need to be conveyed.

A large proportion of African Americans – 80% speak BE, especially in urban areas (Jackson, 2004). For some, deviating from BE is a breach of the communicative code for the African American community (Hecht et al., 2003). According to Gumperz (1978), for African Americans trying to gain entry and mobility in the corporate sector, opting not to use the dominant discourse (SAE) is a barrier to upward mobility. Over the years, BE has evolved from being referred to as Negro dialect, Ebonics (Ebony, meaning black + phonics, denoting sound), African American English, black talk, Black English Vernacular (BEV), and now, BE (Lippi-Green, 1997; Barnes, 1998). Throughout this paper, it will be referred to as BE for convenience. African Americans striving to obtain corporate-level jobs and promotions who speak BE may experience a greater degree of difficulty than those who do not speak BE in mainstream environments. This is because individuals with perceived language barriers could be subjected to discrimination or obstacles in mainstream settings (Donahue, 1985; Fine, 1991). As such, African Americans who are not competent in speaking the dominant discourse face a difficult



challenge in corporate America. Furthermore, all cultures possess common forms of communication within their speech communities, but for the most part, they need to have the ability to communicate in the professional workplace. Fine (1991), states people from different cultures possess specific language styles, which can lead to misunderstandings when brought into the workplace. In addition, these misunderstandings compromise the organizational goals of a company (Fine, 1991). Such research suggests cultural language is inappropriate for the workplace setting although completely normal in familial and social environments. African Americans, particularly members of the younger generations searching for opportunity, who use BE as their primary language are putting themselves at risk for stagnation by not adapting the corporate communicative climate.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Although America is a “diverse” country, this diversity is not always applicable to language (Donahue, 1995). Moreover, diversity does not always transcend into the corporate boardrooms across America. There is a great chance an African American speaking BE during a job interview or at work will be misunderstood or discriminated against by an employer or colleague, which does not bode well for upward mobility in the corporate sector (Jencks & Peterson, 1991). This is a problem because as Patillo-McCoy (1999) states “African Americans run a greater risk of downward mobility than whites, who generally start off as more solidly middle class in the first place” (pg. 44). As a result, there is no room for ambivalence regarding SAE on the part of BE speakers.

More importantly, marketability is especially important given the changing economy. For example, Detroit, a city that was once a mecca for manufacturing-type jobs in the automotive industry is now a ground zero for business development – technology, entertainment and others.

Presently, numbers of African Americans, especially from the “Millennial” (individuals born between 1982 to present) generation are opting not to use the dominant discourse, which is vital for access to resources such as corporate employment and business opportunities (Payne et al., 2000).

Today, this need for marketability refers to all generations – Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials. Furthermore, the exigency of gaining mainstream access for advancement into professional jobs (management and executive positions) is not being stressed to younger generations of African Americans, which is a contributing factor to a lack of concern regarding communication and an increase in resistance to the hegemonic power of the dominant society (Jencks & Peterson, 1991). By hegemonic, this means unspoken power by a dominant group that often leads to forms of oppression (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). Such resistance is problematic because it contributes to a lack of language preparedness African Americans need for corporate job access.

Additionally, as a result of a cultural paradigm, young African Americans, particularly those ranging in age from 18 to 21, the Millennials, do not respect the benefit of being conversant in SAE. Contributing factors for this issue include the influence of popular culture, a decrease in mentorship and others such as single-parent upbringing and lack of exposure to other cultures (Hecht & Ribeau, 2003). Resultantly, many African Americans who are able to obtain corporate-type employment run the risk of remaining stagnant in low-level positions in part to their language and BE fidelity. Furthermore, some members of this same group are resistant to training and mentors for a number of reasons (Smitherman, 2006). Some of these reasons include passivity and complacency about their situations and hopelessness, among other factors (Townsel, 1997). There also exists a lack of trust on the part of the mentee(s) and social distance.

Unfortunately, the stigma (acting white) regarding being conversant in SAE is a mindset that needs to be addressed while African Americans are attending secondary school to prepare them for corporate America and cross-cultural communication. The stigma of “acting white” or being “whitewashed” means using language or ways of speaking, displaying attitude, behaviors, preferences or engaging in activities considered to be mainstream, as stated by Tyson, Darity and Castellino (2005). In today’s corporate workplace, BE is not regarded as an intelligent form of communication by the agents of promotion within a company (Smitherman, 2006; Smitherman-Donaldson & van Dijk, 1988). According to Patillo-McCoy (1999), BE can also be an impediment to advancement in predominately white mainstream environments. Being a good communicator means speaking a language your audience understands (Payne, Downing, & Fleming, 2000). For African Americans, this means being understood by BE speakers and those who use SAE. Unfortunately, to date, there has not been much research dedicated to the area of BE and corporate settings.

As the Detroit and national economy shifts from manufacturing to one that is knowledge-based, there is a dire need for African Americans to adjust to the times. Once, people could graduate from high school and obtain factory or other blue collar jobs without having to be concerned about language and communication skills in the same way corporate job seekers do. However, the economic climate is changing. The demographics of this country are also changing and becoming more diverse. Also, despite the existing hegemonic structure of corporate America, there are even corporate opportunities for bilingual speakers of Spanish, Chinese and other languages. But, such opportunities do not exist for BE speakers because it is not regarded as an actual language.

The purpose of this thesis is to gauge the potentially negative effects of BE in corporate employment by looking at a group of African Americans who have successfully learned how to linguistically navigate their corporate-type jobs. Given America's changing economic climate and the demand for non-blue collar jobs, African Americans entering the workforce need to have the ability to communicatively market themselves for corporate entry and promotion. Based on this argument, this thesis will include the following: Chapter 2 reviews literature pertaining to BE as a form of communication and the implications surrounding its use; chapter 3 discusses the impact of speech codes theory on African Americans' use of BE and why its use is so prevalent; chapter 4 describes the method of research chosen; chapter 5 displays findings and analysis including six interviews with corporate-working African Americans presented as case studies; chapter 6 covers defining moments and; chapter 7 covers limitations and observations .

## **CHAPTER 2 Literature Review**

### **History of BE**

There is a saying that goes, “We cannot know where we are going until we know where we have been.” As a result, before the extensive discussion concerning BE continues, there needs to be a history lesson about the origins of this cultural language. There are different theories regarding the origins of BE. Carpenter (2005) provides three theories : 1) The Anglicist position, which states that BE shares its origin with other European American varieties of English and the foundations are rooted in British-inspired versions; 2) The Creolist position, which indicates the origin of BE is around the mid-1900s and was derived from a form of Creole originally spoken by the Africans transported to America; and 3) BE evolved from European American versions of SAE affected by regionalized dialect. Unlike the first two theories, the last is nameless. Some historians make the argument that everything associated with Africa was eradicated during the slave trade and enslavement in America. However, BE is proven to be a direct effect of slavery given that the mixing of different language speakers during the slave trade served as a catalyst for the spread of a pidgin (common) language (Payne, Downing, & Fleming, 2000; Smitherman & Baugh, 2002). Despite which position stands concerning the history of BE, the origin began with the slave trade. Thinking about the elements of speech codes theory, the slave trade served as a catalyst for the creation of a common language for the slaves.

According to Harper, et al., (1998), BE is rooted in West African English-speaking European and Native American Indian cultures. As posited by Harper, Braithwaite, and LaGrange, “For the descendants of the Africans brought to the Western hemisphere as slaves, standard American English is the imposed language of racial oppression” (1998, p. 27). Furthermore, the widespread usage among African Americans has been associated with labels

including ignorant, lazy, illiterate, ghetto, slow and low-class (Baron, 2000; Wheeler & Swords, 2002.) Again, such information speaks to the potential hindrance the use of BE in the corporate workplace can cause.

Regardless of BE's actual origins, it is much more than mere slang or "ignorant talk" but is a sustaining cultural language that has survived the onslaught and abolishment of slavery and transcended generations of African Americans across the country. BE remains prevalent due to decades of segregation (Hecht, et al., 2003). And, today BE still seems to be more than a rich custom, but a "truth" underneath mainstream culture (Brown, 2002). In other words, there is looming resistance against the individuals in power.

As recently mentioned, the use of BE is connected to language implications and has sparked numerous historical debates. One such example is a controversy about the usage of BE and its impact on young African American students that began over 30 years ago (Smitherman, 2004). It is important to discuss the impact of BE on education because communicative patterns begin before an individual enters the workforce. In 1979, the *Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children v. Ann Arbor School District Board* was a landmark case regarding the use of BE that garnered national attention (Alim, 2005). This case was filed in the Federal Court in 1977 by attorneys from the Michigan Legal Services on behalf of 15 African American children who attended Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School in Ann Arbor, Mich. The focus of the case was African American children from homes where BE was the primary language spoken who had been placed in learning disability and speech pathology classes due to their use of BE. In addition, these children were repeatedly suspended from school and retained in the same grade level without any type of intervention or discussions with the parents to address their unique needs (Smitherman, 2004). The hegemonic structure that disregards BE as a

legitimate language begins as members of this speech community attend school.

As a result of the filing, the presiding judge ruled in favor of the children, finding the Ann Arbor School District guilty of failing to account for the language diversity of the children during their educational process and violating their right to an equal educational opportunity (Smitherman, 2002). In essence, the children involved in this case did not really have learning disabilities. Instead, they were unable to codeswitch, which was interpreted as an inability to learn (Smitherman & Baugh, 2002). The case was misinterpreted by the general public as a plan “to teach ghetto children in black English” (Rickford & Rickford, 2000).

To a similar effect, nearly 20 years after the Ann Arbor case, a lawsuit was filed in Oakland, Calif. On the other side of the country and in a city where half of the school district’s population is African American, the use of BE was once again an issue. Just like the case in Ann Arbor, the subjects in the lawsuit were African American children from households where BE was the primary language spoken (Smitherman, 2000). This case received a lot of media attention, mostly negative.

In this case, the judge passed the Oakland African American English Resolution citing BE as a legitimate language and mandating the school district to incorporate its usage into teaching the children to become conversant in SAE (Smitherman, 2004). According to Marback (2001), the goal of the resolution was to change the stereotype that African American children are incompetent and shift the preconceptions by teachers. As a result of both of these cases, scholars and journalists questioned whether such a linguistic intervention would improve school performance or hinder progress (Baron, 2000). Well known public figures including the Reverend Jesse Jackson, Maya Angelou and Bill Cosby spoke out in protest against the ruling but like many other critics, did not provide any solutions. These cases exhibit the disparity

between the perception of BE and other languages because there was even a need for such litigation. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be any research dedicated to the academic outcomes of the students involved in each case. However, it is important to know about these cases but is a testament to the negative implications connected to language ignorance. Furthermore, these cases show how a communicative disconnect can form with young African Americans (Millennials), especially those being educated in inner cities with little to no exposure to other speech communities.

Insofar as this issue can be understood, the struggle of African American students who speak primarily BE contains factors including language and culture, poverty, accessibility to resources, physical conditions of schools, training of their teachers in urban areas and ethnic and linguistic biases on standardized tests (Wheeler & Swords, 2004). Furthermore, a child who speaks BE could be regarded as slow and less intelligent than a child who speaks SAE, as evident in the previous litigation (Wheeler & Swords, 2004). Unfortunately, a combination of reasons including cultural differences have historically made the instruction of SAE to speakers of BE increasingly difficult.

Wheeler and Swords (2004) posit that "...the child who speaks in a vernacular dialect is not making language errors; instead he or she is speaking correctly in the language of the home discourse community" (p. 471). There is another old saying that goes "Sometimes you have to meet people where they are in order to reach them." In other words, by incorporating BE into the classrooms of the speech community, educators could possibly teach these students to become conversant in SAE and codeswitch effectively. Some studies have shown that BE speakers who are able to codeswitch effectively or alternate their language usage based on environment, perform better academically (e.g., Craig & Washington, 2004). Although there is a difference



between the educational system and the corporate workplace, an intervention needs to take place prior to high school graduation. By learning how to codeswitch or master SAE prior to leaving school, African Americans make themselves more marketable, especially in the corporate sector.

One of the major reasons the American educational system has not addressed the needs of students who speak BE is because it is not regarded as a legitimate language. This question poses a debate about its usage in the classroom, unlike Spanish, French or others (Smitherman, 2004). Moreover, most teachers are trained in traditional methods of language, even though each student possesses a different learning style and we live in a diverse country (Baron, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Additionally, dialect differences can manifest in not just verbal communication, but also in writing and comprehension (Fogel & Ehri, 2000). Because having proficiency in SAE is important, expected and important to success in mainstream society, it is imperative for educators to give the same attention to BE as they do to other languages. Teachers regard foreign languages as acceptable. However, BE does not have the same acceptance (Fogel & Ehri, 2000). Instead, African American BE speakers have been relegated to a deficit paradigm (Ladson-Billings, 2000). In essence, before any major changes could be expected as it relates to African American communication skills, people (educators, employers and society) need to gain a deeper understanding of BE, including its history. The deficit perception of BE speakers transitions from the classroom to the boardrooms across the country where many African Americans from this speech community have struggled to obtain corporate acceptance.

### **The Sounds of Black English**

Now that the history of BE has been established, it also is important to establish examples of its sound and common usages. BE has its own distinct sound and uses the same number of sounds as SAE, which is approximately 45 but the patterns and distribution are different

(Smitherman, 1977). For instance, words such as “then” and “with” would sound like “den” and “wif” (Smitherman, 1977). Influences of SAE can be heard in many of the common SAE words and phrases, given its history. Sometimes referred to as the “Language of Soul,” BE possesses a set of grammatical, pronunciation and syntactical rules (Smitherman, 1977). Moreover, more research needs to be dedicated to providing more a better understanding of BE as an actual language and how it relates to communication overall. From a communication standpoint, every language has a set of rules but this does not mean it belongs in the corporate sector.

However, in further gaining an understanding of BE, the following section details some of the common grammar and syntactical rules of BE. In BE, the use of the verb “be” and its variants are often used to convey a certain meaning (Bland-Stewart, 2005; Hecht, et al., 2003). An example could include someone describing how hard someone works. Instead of saying “The man is a hard worker,” one would say “He a hard worker,” where “is” has been eliminated (Bland-Stewart, 2005, p.7). Another example would include saying “We don’t be listening to what they say.” The use of “be” is commonly used in conjunction with past tense action descriptions.

Another unique feature of BE is the absence of possessives. When listening to a BE conversation, this is an easy identifiable feature. According to Bland-Stewart (2005), even with the many variations of BE, the absence of the possessive “s” is a very notable feature. For instance, when explaining where something is, you would say, “Here Bob watch” as opposed to “Here is Bob’s watch.” This irregular verb form usage replaces a past participle and vice versa (Bland-Stewart, 2005). When establishing what BE is, it also important to provide examples of its usage such as this example.

In addition, according to Thompson, Craig and Washington (2004), BE usage includes

morphosyntactic (transitive and intransitive verbs) types. Syllable contractions are also common. For example, instead of saying “suppose,” a BE speaker would say “spoze” (Hecht, et al., 2003). Additionally, BE speakers tend to stress bisyllabic words including “police,” which would be pronounced “po-lice” instead (Hecht, et al., 2003; Smitherman, 1977). The following chart provides an overview of BE verb usage (Harper, et al., 1998; Rahman, 2008; Wheeler, & Swords, 2004):\*

Examples of BE	SAE Translation
You ain't going? Why you ain't going? <i>Ain't is used as a negative auxiliary for have + not, do + not, are + not and is + not.</i>	You are not going? Why aren't you going?
You done failed the test. You done ate all the food. <i>Done is used to put emphasis a recently completed action.</i>	You failed the test. You ate all the food.
I'm fendin/fenda to cook dinner. <i>Fendin/fenda denotes imminent action.</i>	I'm getting ready to cook dinner.
I been knew that. <i>Been denotes a past action.</i>	I knew that already.
You a liar. You a good singer. <i>The deletion of the words "are" and "a" are another common component.</i>	You are a liar. You are a good singer.
What you gon' do? I'm not gon' cry. <i>Gon' is used in place of "going to"</i>	What are you going to do? I am not going to cry.

Note. A variation of this table was used in a previous paper written by Kanika Jackson in June of 2009 at Wayne State University.

As mentioned earlier, BE is a direct reflection of SAE. Furthermore, the existence of grammatical rules sets BE apart from being a simple vernacular or form of slang for African Americans. Like other languages, people are familiar with the sound but are not fully educated on grammatical rules. This also includes the actual members of the BE speech community. Such

examples display the type of communication barriers that could potentially occur in the corporate workplace with African Americans who do not codeswitch. Although the words are variations of SAE, BE is best understood by members of the same speech community. This is another reason the use of BE in the corporate workplace can pose a problem for those seeking entry and promotion.

### **Co-Cultural Groups**

After gaining a better understanding of what BE is, a discussion can ensue regarding how its usage impacts communication across cultures. According to Orbe (1998), research dedicated to how cultural variables such as race or ethnicity affect the dynamics of the workplace is lacking. This is especially important given this study aims to look at the negative effects of BE on the corporate sector. Orbe (1998) defines co-cultural communication as interactions between underrepresented and dominant groups. For this study, the underrepresented group is African Americans and the dominant group refers to White Americans.

Historically, in every society there is a hierarchy that predetermines the communication system and over time the structures of the system are reinforced by the dominant and non-dominant members. In addition, in most societies, the members of the dominant group(s) create and set norms for ideologies that mostly benefit them and become widely accepted socially (Allen, 2006). The fact that the communicative language of the group in power has received the labels “standard,” “unofficial,” “normal” and “appropriate” often goes unnoticed, especially by the members of the dominant group (Alim, 2004). As a result, members of minority groups are commonly expected to assimilate to White, Anglo-Saxon norms, assumptions and beliefs (Allen, 2006). In the conversation regarding BE, mainstream society has set SAE as the main discourse, which is widely accepted by society, but members of the African American speech community

resist or conform to the standard. They often feel they cannot be themselves at work because of the norm (Allen, 2006). Furthermore, non-dominant groups have a muted experience in society given their lived experiences are not represented in the dominant structure (Orbe, 1998). According to Alim (2004), the failure of black and white communication is the result of cultural differences that are usually ignored. Also, Blacks and Whites are often “forced” into contact where intercultural communication occurs such as jobs or schools (Alim, 2004). This muted experience and fear of assimilation speaks directly to the resistance of SAE by the younger BE speech community, especially in the corporate workplace, which often is not a diverse environment.

Additionally, Orbe (1998) is one of few researchers who have conducted studies in this area. The findings of his study reveal one's muted group status is not permanent, but is something consistently reinforced, changed or challenged by daily communicative interactions (Orbe, 1998). In his dissertation, Orbe (1993) studied the lived experience of African American men in American society as they interact with non-African Americans. In order to achieve this, he strived to give a voice to a group of people who historically had been muted in order to gain additional insight. By conducting a phenomenological study, he discovered African American men to be a distinct speech community and that over time they have to learn how to cope in a European-male dominated society (Orbe, 1993). This work is significant to this study because although it focuses solely on African American males, their experience of learning to cope and communicate in a European American-dominated society is similar to African Americans navigating corporate America.

Botan and Smitherman (1991) explained how the large concentration of African Americans in the automotive industry dominated a common language highly rooted in BE

among the workers (plant workers, supervisors, management and other professionals). In their findings, they discovered the White American auto workers demonstrated great familiarity with BE, compared to corporate White Americans (Botan & Smitherman, 1991). This could be explained by proposition one of speech codes theory, which asserts that the existence of a distinct culture (automotive workers) denotes a unique speech community. Also, this was the result of the relaxed communication requirements of the plants, which allowed great exposure to BE, compared to the corporate setting. The findings of the study exhibit how the dominant discourse predicates the overall climate of an organization. Moreover, it indicates the differences in language requirements, as mentioned earlier. As the job market rapidly changes and the requirements associated, it seems the mindset of some African American job seekers regarding job preparedness is slower to evolve, thus further resistance to SAE by African Americans, especially Millennials.

Fine (1991) states that in the past, companies in the U.S. could be complacent about hiring workers who were not white or male. Moreover, the American workforce is becoming increasingly diverse, meaning corporations will need to hire and promote different employees (Fine, 1991). This is a contrast from the traditional white male population in corporate America. Resultantly, as the population of this country becomes more multicultural, as previously stated, African Americans need to be communicatively competitive or other cultures will dominate opportunities potentially available. Workplaces are locations where communicators regularly display their attitudes and values concerning race (Allen, 2006). This means the agents of authority in corporate settings can set a standard of difficulty for entry and mobility for BE speakers who do not codeswitch.

At a work-training program dedicated to preparing unemployed African Americans for customer service positions in the hospitality industry, researcher Sniad (2007) notes that “professional” identities may challenge learners’ personal values and existence. Kirschenman and Neckerman (1991) conducted a survey of Chicago employers to gauge their perceptions and opinions of African American workers. The surveys included a category for “Sales and Customer Service Jobs,” employers’ listed their criteria for hiring as appearance, communication skills and personality (Kirschenman & Neckerman, 1991). Additionally, communication was ranked very high as employers were seeking employees who could speak English and sounded slightly sophisticated. One employer who owned a flower shop described an African American employee by saying, “He did not speak really white American English. He spoke black American English. And there’s a big discrepancy there. A lot of black people are very bright and speak both black and white, but some don’t speak white, and that makes it very hard” (Kirschenman & Neckerman, 1991, pg. 220). According to Woolard and Schieffelin (1994), “Language mixing, codeswitching, and creoles are often evaluated as indicating less than full linguistic capabilities...” (pg. 63). “Codeswitching” is an important term that will be used throughout this study and will be discussed in more detail later.

Ironically, the employer in this example considered the African American employee as an undesirable employee due to language. Opinions concerning acceptable and unacceptable speech are existent in every linguistic community (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). However, the employer’s English was not standard either, yet it was acceptable because it was not considered stigmatized. In a study by Labov (1972), a speaker is taped speaking BE and SAE and the recordings are judged by subjects from three social classes (Berrey, 1993). Using the scales of success in a street fight, success on the job and quality as a friend, the judges ranked the SAE

recording higher in all three categories (Berrey, 1993). Although the results of the aforementioned study are not recent, its rare findings further validate the stigma associated with African Americans speaking BE in corporate settings today. According to Woolard and Schieffelin (1994), beliefs about what is considered a language as well as the idea of distinct languages are directly related to social domination. Although unfair, this disparity further supports the claim that African Americans need to be able to “speak the part.” Another category in the survey was “Clerical Jobs.” Employers again ranked communication skills as high and considered interpersonal skills important. Also, some of the white-collar employers surveyed felt African Americans’ styles of presentation and speech was inappropriate. To that end, African American speech patterns were a high marker of undesirable trait for job candidates. One respondent noted that their responsibility was to screen job applicants via phone based on their grammar and English (Kirschenman & Neckerman, 1991). Another respondent felt communication styles of most African Americans did not belong in the business community. Again, this information helps explain why African Americans need to learn language balance.

For BE speakers who are unwilling to speak SAE, the “professional” identity challenges their core values, thus the resistance. Resultantly, job seekers interested in obtaining corporate employment may experience a struggle with altering their self-presentations to achieve acceptance (Sniad, 2007; Orbe, 1998). In essence, the negative perceptions pertain to the use of BE as well as the speaker. Such experiences differ for the various generations of African Americans.

### ***Generational Study and BE***

To further assist in the understanding of communication and resistance among African Americans, it is important to explore the generations of African Americans, especially the



Millennial group as well as establish differences in attitudes. Therefore, the following information will provide a generational study of Baby Boomers, Generation X and the Millennials. Each cohort group is distinctively different and this study provides a better understanding of the African American communicative culture throughout the generations. In addition, different scholars cite the age range for each generation differently. As a result, the following information covers a cross-section of the age range and characteristic differences between the generations of African Americans.

### ***Baby Boomers***

Williams, Coupland, Falwell and Sparks (1997) cite that members of this group were born between 1946 and 1964 and are numbered around 83 million. During an era of manufacturing jobs, the Baby Boomers had the ability to graduate high school then head straight to a factory and work for the next 30 plus years at a comfortable salary. Although factory work is just one example of the type of work Baby Boomers did, communication was not much of a factor given the nature of the dominant workplace, which was not corporate. This meant BE could be used in social and workplace settings without much of an issue. This is not to say that effective communication is not important for blue-collar workers. However, the close proximity and nature of their work does not dictate homogeneity as much as the corporate sector (Berrey, 1993). Furthermore, the corporate sector requires the need for fast and effective communication because of the distance of offices and personnel in order to reduce misunderstandings (Berrey, 1993). In addition, now that many Baby Boomers have unfortunately been forced into retirement or are close voluntarily retiring, the communication structure of the corporate workplace is not as relevant to them.

### ***Generation X***

The offspring of the Baby Boomers are members of Generation X. Researchers vary on the exact time they were born. Bova and Kroth (2001), believes they were born between 1965 and 1981 and have a membership of approximately 44 million. According to Williams, et al., (1997), members of this group were born between 1965 and 1976. Interestingly, this group also is referred to as the “Hip-Hop Generation” given the advent of rap during their era (Kitwana, 2003). This statement is important given the use of BE in music made the language familiar to the masses. Especially as it gained popularity through the years, the use of BE became more prevalent in popular culture as a form of resistance to society as a whole for many of its listeners. This resistance includes communication. Despite BE being a cultural language, hip-hop made it “cool” for members of the speech community as well as outsiders.

Also, this is a generation that watched their parents begin to lose their jobs at 50, which taught them to expect change (Bova & Kroth, 2001). Although many members of this group capitalized on the manufacturing economy, a great number of them poised themselves for a shift. Resultantly, with Generation Xers seeking more corporate-type employment, communication and language became more of an important factor. Kitwana (2003) believes that “Our parents’ achievements (the Civil Rights and Black power movements) continue to overshadow our lives as we struggle to answer these questions and define our generation’s own identity and distinctiveness” (p. xii). She views hip-hop as the single greatest achievement of generation “X.” These individuals share a specific set of values and attitudes that has not been fully defined (Kitwana, 2003). This achievement is so revered that it often overshadows the other accomplishments of this generation; especially for this cohort group, which is dedicated to advancing its set of skills for job advancement (Brova & Kroth, 2001). This dedication makes

Gen Xers more likely to be conscious of their language use, despite the reverence of hip-hop, which is the basis for focusing on them in this study. Future studies should focus on Baby Boomers and Millennials. This reverence is so strong, the following generation has caused an evolution of this achievement and transcended language resistance even more. Language resistance moved beyond being “cool” to becoming a lifestyle.

### ***The Millennials***

The offspring of Generation X (the Hip-Hop Generation), the Millennials were born between 1982 and the present and boast a membership of over 80 million (Howe & Strauss, 2003). Plus, one of five has an immigrant parent (Howe & Straus, 2003). This means many Millennials may come from homes where English is not the primary language spoken. This is an interesting fact given the argument regarding sociolinguistics and the negative view BE receives, despite the existence of several other languages. Furthermore, many parents of Millennials wish for their children to have marketable skills for mainstream society. However, some African American children and teens reinforce the use of BE by ostracizing SAE because it is considered a form of “acting white” (Hecht, et al., 2003). In addition, everyone has an “idiolect” or a preferred speech style that carries social value for him/her as well as their respective speech community (Berrey, 1993). A feature that is highly perpetuated in present-day hip-hop/rap with the advent of BE variations, even speech community members are unfamiliar with.

Additionally, Millennials are highly concerned with peer networks and not conforming (Howe & Strauss, 2003). According to Howe and Strauss (2003), “Millennials appear to be bothered more than previous generations by “preferential admissions quotas or formulas based on race” (pg. 3). As one can see, this is evident in the resistance of some African Americans to

speak SAE. The great need to avoid conformity is ever-present in language use by this generation.

The foundational differences between each cohort group have had an effect on work ethics, attitude and communicative actions. To this effect, the changing generations has contributed to the rebellious nature of the Millennials, especially as it relates to embracing different forms of communication. The aforementioned generational discussion also is important to establish an understanding the lack of corporate communicative preparedness among African Americans, particularly the Millennials. This following literature also aims to further explore the reasons behind this lack of preparedness and resistance. In further, exploring the idea of co-cultural groups, it is important to define and discuss the term “codeswitching.”

### **Codeswitching**

In language and language acquisition studies, “codeswitching” is used to describe bilingual speakers or language learners’ ability to use two separate language varieties on separate occasions or in the same communicative episode (Nilep, 2006). To that effect, “code” denotes language or a variety of language (Nilep, 2006). So in other words, language users choose what “code” to use when communicating and listening (Nilep, 2006). So, for the context of this study, what is codeswitching? Codeswitching is alternating the use of language between BE and SAE depending on the setting – social or professional (Patillo-McCoy, 1999). Historically, codeswitching involved African slaves “coding” their dialect of English to protect the secret of escape from slave masters or to mask their expressions of pain and agony (Smitherman, 1977). Many BE speakers refer to codeswitching as “talking/speaking proper” or “talking white.” For instance, an African American man or woman may speak SAE when speaking to his or her doctor. However, when he or she returns home and discusses the appointment with a family

member, he or she would resume the use of BE. Codeswitching emphasizes the prevalent differences between whites and African Americans, including those whom are educated with well-paying jobs (Patillo-McCoy, 1999). In other words, codeswitching displays the African American's ability to navigate more than one language, a feature important for finding a balance between BE and SAE. Brown (2002) refers to BE as "Black Speak," which he says communicates a "truth" of shared cultural history to those conversant in this type of speech. Also, purposeful dialect switch between BE or Black Speak and SAE suggests a command in both languages (Brown, 2002). As stated earlier, for African Americans in the corporate sector, such communicative ability is important.

Examples of common places where BE is used include church, where African American pastors often speak this code of language to relate to members; homes of African Americans; and settings with predominately African Americans present such as parties or social gatherings. Places where SAE is commonly used include places of corporate-type employment, where mostly non-African Americans are present; classrooms in schools that are not predominately African American; parties or social gatherings with mostly non-African Americans; and business interactions such as calling customer service, job interviews or visiting the doctor.

These examples provide a general overview of codeswitching. This is important to note given speaking BE in the corporate workplace creates potential barriers. The importance of codeswitching is evident in studies regarding successful and unsuccessful African American job interviewees (Akinaso & Ajirotutu, 1982; Hecht, et al., 2003; Pennington, 2000). In the study by Akinaso and Ajirotutu (1982), their findings revealed that African American interviewees who were able to codeswitch were perceived more favorably by potential employers.

In essence, codeswitching requires the ability to linguistically negotiate two worlds – black and white (Patillo-McCoy, 1999). The lack of codeswitching could be attributed to African Americans fearing the loss of linguistic relation to their respective communities and losing part of their culture, a feature of speech codes theory. It has been established that within every culture there is a distinct language community (Brown, 2002). Codeswitching is not just relevant to BE speakers but to any speech community aiming for a balance between their language and the dominant discourse.

Accordingly, codeswitching can be relevant to groups other than just African Americans. For instance, within every culture, whether it is Black, White, Hispanic or Asian, there is a vernacular relative to their respective speech community. For instance, Hispanics speak Spanish in their communities and have resources in their native tongue. Asians may speak Japanese, Korean, Chinese or Mandarin and so on. Hecht, Jackson and Ribeau (2003), describes culture as a historically transmitted system of symbols, meanings and norms that emerges intergenerationally and in social interactions.

Unfortunately, unlike other cultural languages, BE has been relegated to a substandard way of speaking even though cultural dialects are a universal phenomenon. Moreover, despite its roots in English, BE is often viewed as foreign. This could be attributed to the fact many sociolinguistic and pragmatic variables not reaching a level of awareness strong enough to prevent discrimination and negative views against minorities (Berrey, 1993).

### **Influence of Hip-Hop/Rap on BE**

Adding to the conversation about BE is popular culture. With the ever-increasing popularity of hip-hop/rap, its influence can be heard just about anywhere. Artists such as Lil' Wayne, Kanye West and Snoop Dogg can be seen and heard in commercials for a variety of

retail products, television shows and movies. A form of music created by Generation X, it is not surprising that this genre of music affects the broad use of BE. Hip-hop has a great significance to African Americans, especially youth (Millennials) and sometimes, seems to serve as a “voice of reason.”

For instance, Detroit and political activist, Michael Eric Dyson (2007) believes hip-hop provides its listeners with up- to- date information on contemporary politics, history and race relations. Also, he asserts hip-hop artists are instrumental in defining African American authenticity. According to Dyson (2007), hip-hop is to today’s youth, the Millennials, what the civil rights and church leaders were to the Baby Boomers. Dyson’s thoughts about hip-hop’s influence on the African American community are important to the discussion about the strong influence of BE use on the African American community. Additionally, the influence of hip-hop on the African American speech community is further spreading a code for the community and the broad use of BE. “Many rappers consider themselves to be educators and see at least a portion of their mission as raising the consciousness of their communities” (Morrell, 2002, p.74). This could be another reason Millennials are resistant to “regular” mentors, especially as it relates to communication.

Researcher Andreana Clay from UCLA spent time working as a volunteer at a youth center in California, where she overtly observed the contribution hip-hop provides to the lives of urban youth. As observed by Clay (2003), “it is imperative for those Black youth to engage in the performance of hip-hop culture to authenticate a Black identity” (p. 1352). During her observations, she noticed that the majority of the children at the center engaged in hip-hop-related activities including communication. This speaks to the need for “community” and belonging.

Although hip-hop/rap was created by and is important to Generation X, the Millennial Generation has taken over ownership of the movement and moved it in a different direction than the original intent. Rap music has a tradition of transcending communication use through its metaphorical play on words. Examples include “bad” really meaning “good” or “crib” referring to “home.” Today, this play on words is a popular “language of resistance” to anything standard with variations of BE, even traditional speech community members do not understand such as “fa-sheeze” (for sure).

The use of BE connects the middle class African Americans to the poor and differentiates them from the mainstream (Patillo-McCoy, 1999). This statement is important in answering the question about why there is resistance by African Americans to speaking SAE. Furthermore, the African American community has a stigma regarding speaking SAE called “acting white” (Godley & Minnici, 2008). Noting “acting white” is very important in understanding the resistance to speaking SAE. This stigma is part of a “push-pull” system in African American culture, where African Americans feel they are being pushed toward mainstream culture while they simultaneously pull away from it (Smitherman, 1977). Such a statement suggests there is a fear of assimilation by African Americans who historically have been striving to find a place in society and maintain an identity.

The phrase “acting white” is also synonymous with achieving academic and professional success (Tyson, et al., 2005). Unfortunately, for this reason, some African American students working to achieve success have their “blackness” questioned by their family and peers (Tyson, et al., 2005). Even worse, they may be discriminated against by their own cultural group for choosing to codeswitch (Payne, et al., 2000). This information further validates the reason many African Americans, especially Millennials choose not to speak the dominant discourse or



codeswitch. They may also be considered “saddity,” which is a BE description of acting like a snob, “acting uppity” or “putting on airs” (Smitherman, 1977). It is very common in the African American community for men and women who fit the aforementioned descriptions to also be referred to as “sell-outs” or “Uncle Toms” (Smitherman, 1977). The name “Uncle Tom” refers to the main character from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Smitherman, 1977). This reference is more commonly used by Baby Boomers. In the book, the character was viewed by his peers as subservient to the white majority, which is rejected in African American culture (Smitherman, 1977). In addition, the regular use of SAE in some African American communities is considered to be “bougie” (pronounced boo - jee and is a BE form of bourgeoisie), meaning the speaker thinks he or she is better than everyone else (Brown, 2006). This is because most people learn their communication styles and rules based on racial group memberships and socialization (Allen, 2006).

Consequently, as many African Americans, hoping to “keep it real” or fit in with the “in crowd,” they may choose not to codeswitch so they will not appear to be “acting White” (Tyson, et al., 2005). Overall, the unfortunate stigma connected to upward mobility has contributed to an attitude of “keeping it real” and not becoming like “the Man,” a term in reference to white society or those in power. In other words, while members of this rebellious population are overly concerned with authenticity, their multicultural counterparts are achieving the success that could be available to them as well.

As stated before, BE is a derivative of SAE. It can legitimately be referred to as a language because of the historical and social circumstances surrounding it (Speicher & McMahon, 1992). The rich history of BE and more recently, the heavy influence of hip-hop culture has created a strong connection and code of communication for members of its speech

community. There seems to be a gap in the literature as far as more programs, which are not the remediation-type, dedicated to helping BE speakers learn to codeswitch. According to Kirschenman and Neckerman (1991), very little research has been dedicated to employers' direct views about African American workers and how it affects their recruitment and hiring processes. Additionally, there is a lack of literature concerning corporate-related views of BE.

As mentioned earlier, every culture has its own mode of communication. However, unfortunately given the structure of American society, it is not acceptable for African Americans to transport their code of communication (BE) from the community to the boardroom. The literature reviewed in this study has explained the history of BE and provided examples. It also answered questions about why there is a resistance by African Americans to speaking SAE, how its use could pose problems in the corporate sector and how they could potentially find a balance between both languages. Looking the part is easy but "speaking the part" requires competency in SAE and BE, a skill more members of this speech community need to acquire.

As such, knowing the history of BE and how it has transcended the generations, like many languages leads to questions about why it can also pose problems for corporate job seekers and employees.

### **CHAPTER 3 Theoretical Framework**

Several communicative theories are relevant to the use of BE. For example, Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) or Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT) would both be useful. With CTI, identity can be communicated within and between relational partners as well as group members (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005). This is relevant to BE speakers because it is a cultural language spoken primarily by African Americans and can serve as a form of identification between group members. Also, SAT theory says people adjust their language based on their environment, which is also relevant to African American speaking culturally with other members (Bell & Brown, 2006).

However, for this study, to further develop a framework for the use of BE, the resistance to SAE and the impact of its usage in the corporate workplace, the speech codes theory is enlisted (Philipsen, 2000). Speaking culturally within a setting outside of a speech community can be considered a speech act (Philipsen, 2000), thus providing a basis for the act of speaking BE in a corporate office. This theory is instrumental in placing cultural speech beyond its respective speech communities and into social life, such as corporate America as it transmits messages about social identity (Carbaugh, 2007). According to Woolard (1994), speech codes emphasize the psychological state of the speaker while simultaneously downplaying the social consequences of speech (pg. 59). There is a great deal of research dedicated to the effect of outsiders infiltrating and experiencing cultural speech communication such as the studies conducted by Philipsen (1976) and Smitherman (1988). However, it is equally important to explore the effects of speech community members, such as BE speakers functioning communicatively in social environments outside of their norm. Speech codes theory, also known as culturally distinctive codes of communicative conduct theory, posits that culture itself is a

code system bearing meanings and ideals, which is a large issue for many BE speakers (Philipsen, 1997). For many African Americans, the use of BE provides them with a sense of “community” and belonging. It provides them with an identity (a Black identity) and a connection to their respective speech community (Rahman, 2008). Community is defined as a group of people with shared symbols, meanings, norm and history (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003). Regarding BE and African Americans, the importance of “community” represents communal conversations where individuals negotiate the way they will “conduct their lives together” (Gudykunst, 2005). Such a bond creates in-group and out-group distinctions that manage social relationships (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003). As it pertains to African Americans, shared history, circumstances, attitudes and experiences contributes to the wide use of BE, and in some cases, resistance to the dominant discourse.

The aforementioned “code” dominates what a group says, how they say it and in what context. Also, “code” is an encompassing system of beliefs, values and images that are reflected in language patterns (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003). Hecht, Jackson and Ribeau (2003, pg. 40) assert that “When shared by a community of persons, codes serve social ordering and coordinating functions, guiding language choices and patterns through which people come to know their place in the world.” To that effect, there are many African Americans who have been socialized since infancy to speak BE.

Rooted in anthropology and linguistics, speech codes is theory comprised of an ethnography of speaking (Gudykunst, 2005). Developed by theorist and communication professor Gerry Philipsen, it identifies codes that limit communicative interactions within a specific speech community. Furthermore, for speakers, speech varies depending on the culture and the social setting. Specific speech codes are the catalyst for interaction among members of a

speech community. The original idea of speech codes was introduced in the early 70s by British sociologist Basil Bernstein. For African Americans, speech codes theory suggests that only speaking BE is an acceptable form of communication, especially in the presence of other “community” members. This information is important in answering the question about why some African Americans are resistant to speaking SAE, even with members of their own speech community. Furthermore, this theory will help provide an understanding of this form of communication in a wider context. For this study, a wider context denotes how BE speakers function in the hegemonic structure of corporate America. According to Philipsen (2003), the theory provides a pragmatic experience for the speaker and the listeners.

Accordingly, there are six distinctive propositions of speech codes that further explain this theory including existence, substance, sites, observation and force and are as follows: (a) Wherever there is a distinctive culture, there is a distinctive speech code, (b) In any given speech community, several speech codes are used (c) A speech code represents a culturally distinctive psychology, sociology and rhetoric, (d) The significance of speaking depends on the speech codes used by participants to assign the meanings of communicative interactions, (e) The terms, rules and premises of a speech codes are incorporated into speech patterns unknowingly and (f) The shared speech of a community predicts, explains and controls the form of discourse about the intelligibility, caution and morality of communicative conduct (Philipsen, Coutu, & Covarrubias, 2005; Philipsen, et. al., 2005).

### ***How the Six Propositions Relate to African Americans and BE***

Now the six propositions of speech codes theory have been listed, it is important to show how they specifically relate to the use of BE by African Americans. For proposition one, African Americans are a distinct culture given their shared history stemming from slavery. Proposition

one also indicates culture as a code (symbols, meanings, premises and rules about aspects of life) as opposed to a geographical, political or social unit (Philipsen, et al., 2005). Therefore, African Americans have constructed a distinct culture of life conducive to speaking BE as it has been passed down through the generations. However, corporate America also has a distinct culture/code due to its traditional hegemonic structure. Moreover, corporate America is detached from the culture of African Americans, creating a clash.

Proposition two states there are several speech codes used within a speech community. This is relevant to African Americans and BE because as stated earlier, only 80% speak it. Also, some choose to codeswitch while others opt not to. Resultantly, this proposition suggests there are different contrasts within a speech community. Such conduct is the result of individual speech community members possessing their own sociocultural identity within social contexts (Brown, 2002). This suggests some African Americans still have a sense of individual identity, although they are a part of a collective group, which preserves freedom and creativity within language (Gudykunst, 2005).

Regarding BE and African Americans, proposition three addresses the action of speaking heard daily. Within this action, there are displayed meanings about human nature (society), social relations (sociology), strategic conduct (rhetoric) and even traces of social relations (Philipsen, et al., 2005). These elements are present in all distinct cultures, as indicated by the theory. Concerning this study, this proposition suggests the situated vocabulary of African Americans' language has personal meaning for them. It is a "truth," meaning it bears shared social identity and heritage (Brown, 2002).

Proposition four addresses the interpretive process of a speech act and how a speaker views his/her or others' communicative acts (Philipsen, et al., 2005). In other words, each culture

interprets the communicative acts of others as an action or behavior. For example, during a conversation between two African Americans, one may say “Get outta here!” to express their excitement or disbelief. Another culture member may interpret this differently. This proposition is important because for any culture using the language of their respective speech community in the corporate environment, there is a possibility for misunderstandings. More specifically, this proposition suggests that people unfamiliar with African American culture and BE may easily misinterpret their language use.

Proposition five asserts there are meanings (socially constructed terms, rules and premises) about communicative conduct within the words and expressions used in a speech community (Philipsen, et al., 2005). The aforementioned use of “Get outta here!” is an example of this. Instead of literally meaning “get out of the room,” this phrase has a socially constructed meaning of excitement or disbelief. For African Americans, especially the younger generation, great exposure to BE provides them with this code. Despite potential detachment from historical cultural facts, being surrounded by family members and others who speak it give speech community members the rules of communicative conduct.

Proposition six answers the question about how speech codes influence communicative conduct (Philipsen et al., 2005). It addresses the power of culture on speech communities. According to this theory, cultures are not fixed, unitary or deterministic but are instead are dynamic. This suggests that not only African Americans are prone to using BE but any individuals widely exposed to this speech community. Furthermore, this proposition shows how codes or cultures are used in our efforts to shape communicative behavior of themselves and others. Moreover, these efforts are not necessarily successful in encouraging people to conform to the codes of a particular culture (Philipsen, et al., 2005).

Furthermore, for speakers, speech varies depending on the culture and the social setting. Thus far, the propositions of the speech codes help explain the importance of BE to members of this speech community. For members of the BE speech community, speech codes help provide a framework for communication practices between an underrepresented group (African Americans) and the dominant group – corporate America. And, accordingly members of this speech community may feel like outsiders in mainstream settings, particularly corporate America. According to Orbe (1998), co-cultural differences are interpreted differently by group members from within a speech community. This is because in the corporate workplace, feeling like an outsider may prompt BE speakers to choose communication styles based on their perception of costs and rewards as well as preferred outcome (Orbe, 1998). This means that typical speech communities have different forms of communication – in-group (less formal), out-group (formal and coded) and casual. However, the situation (organization, position of the “outsider,” presence of other speech community members, etc.) dictates the speech community member’s communication at work (Orbe, 1998). Moreover, proposition six of the theory suggests there is a discursive force that contributes to speech community members to succumbing to social norms. According to Payne, Downing and Fleming (2000), children recognize the socioeconomic advantage of speaking the standard speech codes of the culture in which they belong by age 10. This discursive force helps explain the resistance of the Millennial group of African Americans to speak SAE due to communicative peer pressure. The idea of “community” mandates a need for belonging and thus directs the communicative behavior of some African Americans. More information regarding the Millennial group will be addressed later. However, people who use speech codes considered sub-standard, such as BE, experience social isolation, less power and discrimination (Payne, Downing, & Fleming, 2000).



In essence, speech codes theory speaks to cultural traditions such as the use of BE. It consists of code, conversation as well as community and demonstrates how conversations can convey shared meanings and membership within a cultural community (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003). For today's corporate workplace, it means members of this speech community face potential difficulty when communicating with their multicultural supervisors and colleagues if there are not shared meanings. In other words, as Orbe (1998) states, if a BE speaker feels like an outsider, there could be potential negative issues with co-cultural communication. Allen (2006) states that organizations receive benefit when there are positive interpersonal experiences in the workplace. She cites these positive experiences as a prerequisite to effective job performance, social support, sense of identification with the organization and participation in the company as a whole (Allen, 2006). In his study on co-cultural communication, Orbe (1998) gave the example of a sole female within a male-dominated company who regularly muted her disdain to inappropriate comments about women. However, once another woman joined the company and voiced her disapproval at the same comments, the once sole female changed her communication style. The presence of another "outsider" gave her a sense of belonging (Orbe, 1998). Similarly, BE gives many African Americans a sense of community and belonging as speech codes theory states.

Its historical roots from slavery provide many African Americans with a distinct identity and sense of cultural pride. Although speech codes theory is not designed to define what BE is per se, it can answer the question regarding what this language is for its speech community and why it is so important. For a number of African Americans, BE encompasses the essence of their culture as outlined in the theory.

The multi-faceted nature of speech codes theory provides a theoretical explanation for the communicative importance of BE to African Americans. For a group of people historically melded together and forced to learn how to become a cohesive group, the notion of belonging, community and tradition is important and somewhat redemptive, especially for communication. Like many cultures, having a shared language sets them apart from other groups. Resultantly, speech codes theory provides an understanding of this communicative need for cultural speech communities.

### ***Why are Speech Codes Important to Communication Scholars?***

Speech Codes' anthropological roots exhibit a factor of communication that can potentially go unnoticed – power. For the BE speech community, the use of the language is more than communication, but is a form of identity and rebellion (Tyson et al, 2005). As this study aims to explore the importance of “speaking the part,” speech codes theory validates the strength of communication as a whole. For instance, based on this theory, BE speakers have formed a distinct social community around this language that has managed to transcend the boundaries of socialization via a generation incapable of or unwilling to codeswitch. Moreover, for the dominant society, especially corporate America, the perception of BE users is often stereotypical due to a disconnect as well as a lack of understanding and education.

In the realm of corporate America and communication, speech codes not only explains the use of a cultural language such as BE but also reveals deeper meaning in the use of SAE. Also, speech codes theory helps make an argument for sociolinguistics and sociocultural issues in the workplace. To that effect, the workplace can be seen as a place of language resistance for some African Americans – speaking BE versus SAE. Research (Trethewey, 1997) finds that marginal voices (BE) pose a challenge to those in power (corporate America). Furthermore,

resistance is not always as blatant as an uprising or rebellion. According to Trethewey (1997), “Resistance is clearly a complex and often subtle phenomenon” (pg. 284). For this study, refusing to speak SAE could be viewed as a subtle phenomenon. Also, for the opposing group, resistance could serve as a form of empowerment against their dominant group (Trethewey, 1997). Again, speech codes theory gives African Americans who speak BE a sense of community and belonging. For this reason, the corporate workplace could be viewed in such a way (resistance/conformity) by African Americans, thus validating the use of speech codes among African Americans within the office.

As we have learned, forms of vernacular have significant use and meaning for various speech communities. As a result, speech community outsiders have the potential to misinterpret direct or overheard communication. In the case of this study, corporate managers can potentially misinterpret something a BE speaker says due to his or her disconnect with this particular speech community. Furthermore, the same applies to BE speakers incapable of codeswitching between SAE and BE. This could translate into chaotic intergroup communication within a corporate office place. Additionally, a BE speaker’s communication skills, as opposed to appearance and skills can supersede a person’s skills, which further exhibits the power of communication.

In addition, speech codes exhibits another factor relevant to communication scholars for this study. There are often discussions about race and class issues within corporate sectors; however such can apply to corporate communication. There are those who can negotiate communicatively and those who cannot, which adds an anthropological branch to communication. Those who are unable to negotiate communicatively will possibly be among the “have-nots,” who are unable to obtain necessary resources and promotions.

Based on the cross-section of literature and choice of theory, throughout the remainder of this thesis, this study will seek to address the following research questions: Why are some African Americans resistant to speaking SAE? Why is speaking BE an identity marker for some African Americans? And, how can African Americans find a balance between BE and SAE in corporate employment? Overall, this research needs to provide a better understanding about the how successful African Americans have managed to achieve corporate success despite language disparities.

## **CHAPTER 4 Method Justification**

In order to gain tangent personal experiences and data needed concerning BE, interviews were conducted with African Americans Gen Xers who have corporate work experience such as managers, supervisors, analysts and other similar positions. People with these titles were chosen because such positions require decision making, the ability to delegate duties and communicate (codeswitch) with other departments. Also, this group has the best theoretical potential for codeswitching ability. Dilley (2004) states that the interviews are much more than mere protocol and data gathering. He sees interviews as a dialogue between an interviewer and a respondent that provide shared experiences for qualitative discovery. Before any data were collected, a convenience sample of respondents was selected based on race and profession. As a result, six African Americans were interviewed about their perceptions of BE including three males and three females from metropolitan Detroit, Atlanta and Los Angeles. Ages of the respondents ranged from 28 to 40. All of the respondents, with the exception of one, are college-educated and work in corporate-type jobs such as human resources, higher education, corporate insurance, automotive industry and telecommunications.

Next, the six interviews were organized into individual case studies for comparison. According to Gomm, Hammersley and Foster (2000), case studies provide a basis for drawing conclusions about a general type of phenomenon or about members of a wider population of cases. The purpose of choosing case studies for these individuals was to draw conclusions from their lived experiences with language (SAE and BE) in the workplace and compare it to the literature in order to determine how they manage and maintain communicative success. Case studies are instrumental in drawing conclusions because it involves a range of isolated variables or data that can be gathered by personal observation and enlist an informal writing style that is

possibly narrative with verbatim quotation (Gomm et al., 2000). Yin (1994) states that case studies are a preferred method when answering “how” and “why” questions as well as when the investigator has little control over events or the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context. Such was the case with looking at the use of BE by six African Americans who have achieved corporate success. BE is a contemporary phenomenon with corporate America representing the real-life context. By using case studies, one could derive “how” these individuals achieved success, despite exposure to BE, and found language balance in their careers.

Initially, the participants were chosen based on the PI’s familiarity with their professional backgrounds and accessibility. Correspondence explaining the study and requesting interviews were made to the respondents via telephone and email. Once permission was granted by the HIC committee and the participants, interviewees were sent an informed consent form to review, sign and return before interviews were conducted and recorded in person as well as via telephone. These forms, which are the only documents bearing the participants’ names, are maintained in a locked drawer in the home of the principal investigator. Actual names were not used during the interview process. Additionally, they were informed they could discontinue to participation in the study at any time. Furthermore, all data was coded for anonymity, transcribed verbatim and analyzed. After each interview was transcribed, which totaled 51 pages single spaced, the tapes were destroyed, leaving behind the written transcriptions for analysis.

Some of the aims of this study were to determine what BE is, why there is resistance to speaking SAE and how members of the speech community can find a balance. By conducting interviews with in-depth open-ended questions, the findings could reveal personal views on what BE really means to each interviewee and first-hand knowledge from interactions with out-group

members. The interview questions are listed in Appendix A. In addition to the history of BE, it is important to understand what it really means to the speech community to validate the literature and theoretical framework. Furthermore, the interviews will help reveal if the meaning of BE is consistent for all of the interviewees. Being able to detect voice intonations, changes in poise and body language provide additional understanding and exposed moments of nervousness. According to Dilley (2004), interviewing requires journalistic-type skills in order to effectively analyze the interview. He contends that journalists have the ability to not only gauge the content of the interviewee but the body language as well, which is beneficial to researchers as well.

Prior to conducting the six interviews, an interview protocol was drafted based on the need to understand what BE really means to the respondents, the resistance for some and how balance was and can be achieved. The first step was to develop questions based on the theoretical perspective that BE can be an issue in the corporate workplace, if not used properly. Following a theoretical proposition is the first and most preferred strategy for analyzing case study evidence (Dilley, 2004). The protocol questions were then divided into three categories based on this perspective— how our childhoods influence our communicative identities, the way our culture shapes the way we speak within our respective speech communities and with others as well as how the way we speak impacts our professional communication. By asking the interviewees open-ended questions within the aforementioned categories, each person was able to provide personal narratives about their honest experiences and feelings concerning BE from childhood, intra-and-intercultural relations and their present-day corporate jobs.

In analyzing the data, the responses were compared to the literature for parallels in the overall perspective of BE being a potential hindrance. This is known as cross case synthesis (Yin, 2003). Using this method for qualitative studies requires using a moderate number of case

studies to form an argumentative interpretation, where some cases may have the same outcome and others may be different (Yin, 2003). The over purpose of cross case synthesis is to bring together the findings of several cases and search for patterns across them (Yin, 2003). Also, during the analysis, the transcriptions were coded for similar themes and revelatory thoughts such as BE as a form of resistance, identity markers, codeswitching.

### ***What Did the Interviews Reveal?***

Literature concerning BE suggests there is a misunderstanding about this cultural language. The interviews validated this lack of understanding of BE by society, especially African Americans. This is important because our language is a part of our identity. If we do not understand what we are speaking, why it is important and the impact it has, how can progression occur? Furthermore, this lack of BE speech community does not understand their own language, it can be expected that this individual also will not have an understanding of the backlash connected to its use, especially in the corporate sector.

The literature has established that BE is a cultural language like Spanish, French and others. However, the interviews further revealed that although many African Americans speak BE, they equate it with slang, being ghetto or laziness and sometimes all three. Yet, the language is still being spoken and children are being socialized to communicate this way despite this negative perception. As such, the personal stories and opinions shared during the interviews revealed that African Americans, whether they codeswitch or not, need to establish who they are communicatively. Such in-depth information would not have been extracted from a questionnaire, survey or focus group.



## **CHAPTER 5 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

As indicated by Boone's (2003) article about call-response communication in the black college classroom, African American speech is emotional, dynamic and demonstrative. The dynamic nature of this vernacular is explained in the aforementioned literature. Also, as some of the literature has indicated, there is a disparity between the codeswitching ability of the Gen Xers and the Millennials. Products of the hard-working Baby Boomers, Gen Xers understood the importance of overcoming professional challenges in order to achieve success. On the other hand, as the research of this study has indicated, the Millennial group has been resistant to the tactics their parents used to achieve corporate success. They exhibit an attitude of "I am taking my identity back" and refusing to conform but in turn, sacrificing the same level of success as their predecessors.

To help support the argument that Gen Xers know how to achieve corporate success through their communicative ability compared to the Millennial group; the following information will focus on how six African American Gen Xers have achieved and maintained corporate success as well as what we can learn from them based on this study. These six individuals, who live in different American cities, have all managed to gain entry into corporate America and all share a different experience in maintaining that membership. For this study, the six cases we will examine are called Single in Detroit, Culture in California, Atlanta Transplant, Detroit Automotive and Higher Learning in Detroit. Below is a brief description of each case.

### **Single in Detroit**

Ms. Single in Detroit, is 29-years-old and was born and raised in the city of Detroit, Michigan. The product of a single-parent home, Single in Detroit is the middle-child of five, with

the ages ranging from 32 to seven-years-old. Educated and middle-class, she is now the corporate insurance agent for a major company in downtown Detroit.

### **Culture in California**

Similarly, Ms. Culture in California is around the same age as Single in Detroit and also is educated and professionally employed. Unlike Single in Detroit, she came from a more communicative-balanced household. A 30-year-old higher education professional, she was also raised in a single-mother household. Also, unlike Single in Detroit, Culture in California's mother was an educator and stressed grammar as well as speech to her children, providing her with a strong communicative-foundation early on.

### **Detroit Automotive**

Mr. Detroit Automotive is an executive at a major automotive company in Detroit and is in his early-40s. Unlike Single in Detroit and Culture in California, he holds a position of authority in his corporate workplace and has been with the company for over 10 years.

### **Detroit Resource**

Another Gen X who has achieved corporate success and learned to achieve language balance is a 28-year-old African American male we will call Mr. Detroit Resource. Also college-educated, he works as a human resource professional for a major company in metro-Detroit.

### **Atlanta Transplant**

Another Gen Xer who has achieved corporate success but along a different path than the previously included respondents is a female we will call the Atlanta Transplant. Originally from Los Angeles, she relocated to Atlanta over a decade ago in order to pursue job opportunities. At 37-years-old, she is now an independent make-up artist who previously worked as a supervisor

for a major call center in Atlanta. Also unlike the previous respondents, she does not have a college degree.

### **Detroit Higher Learning**

The last respondent who we will call Detroit Higher Learning is another Gen Xer who has achieved corporate success. He is a 28-year-old college-educated and currently works as a financial aid officer for a major university in Michigan, a position that requires him to interact with parents and students of all cultures as well as give regular presentations across the state.

*RQ1 Why is speaking BE an identity marker from some African Americans?*

In gaining an understanding of what BE means to African Americans, it is important to gauge how the respondents view language in their own lives. Understanding what language personally means to each respondent will help put resistance into context. These responses also will reveal what they have learned directly and indirectly about BE growing up and how these received messages have shaped their overall view of their respective language use. For four of the participants in this study, language as an identity marker was the result of their environments growing up.

Detroit Automotive: I was like in the second or third grade and my oldest brother was driving me home. It was some of my friends from my new school in the car and we were on our way home from my new school. He was imitating how some of my Caucasian classmates talk and I think that was kind of the first real moment of, 'It is different.' And actually, he making fun of the way I talk. I can hear his voice. You know what, in thinking about more, he was messing with me about it in front of them. It's funny now because he's a politician in Texas, so he can't get up there and you know, speak Ebonics. These people can't elect you with you getting up there speaking any kind of way. You can't serve as the county commissioner or something speaking Ebonics. That was a vivid moment when the difference [difference in languages] became clear to me.

Culture in California: ... I would just say that you have to understand that how one black person speaks, if you will, isn't a reflection of how all of us speak. You have to understand that there are many black people who have many different ways of speaking. I mean, you think for the person that is Haitian and you know, maybe they're like, you know, second generation or whatever and they're here. But, you know they grew up, they understand

Creole, they understand French, they understand Patois, you know, but they also understand American slang as well as just the English language properly...many black people, especially, who have the ability to sort of vacillate between different dialects or styles, you know, of speech, if you will. I'll say styles of speech. ....We're a group of people who are so diverse...who got dropped off in so many lands, that's there's not just one language that we speak, you know. And our sort of ghetto slang, if you will, is really that southern country, I don't wanna sound ignorant, but you think about a southern country white person from Mississippi who really hasn't got out of the backwoods themselves and they have sort of a country twang and slang, where it's not proper English either. But ours may have a little bit more of an edge to it but ultimately we're speaking the same...

Atlanta Transplant: I would say just, historically, you know, this is...our culture has always had its own language in regards to communicating with one another going all the way back to slavery. Because we had to make up our own language, we had to...and not to mention, a lot of our ancestors didn't have an education and go to school. They didn't go to school, they didn't really learn how to speak proper English but yet, we still had to find a way to communicate, , sometimes in code, so that the slave masters, I'm gonna call them, would not know exactly what it is that we were talking about to each other.

Detroit Higher Learning: I think it's ever-changing and evolving. Unfortunately in our culture, people speak very different. I guess that's a good way to put it. ....we make up words and try to convince others that they're real words or we take a formal word and add a tense to it, and again, we're making up another word that really makes no sense.

Detroit Automotive's sudden epiphany about there being a difference in language during his brother's taunting shows his language identity. His comment about his brother's political position is consistent with the research that shows individuals need to speak SAE in order to achieve certain levels of success (Sniad, 2001). These recollections are also important because in the theoretical framework chapter, it was surfaced that codes shared by a community dictate language functions and so on (Hecht, et al., 2003). For these respondents, parents, siblings, aunts, extended family, neighbors and colleagues shaped their views and use of language, especially BE. Additionally, their exposure to other cultures and education has provided them an awareness of different "codes" of language. Throughout this study, one of the widely used concepts is – "codeswitching." As surfaced, the original intent of codeswitching was to protect the secret of escape from slave masters or mask expressions of pain and suffering (Smitherman, 1977).

Atlanta Transplant's response regarding the some of the history of BE indicates her thoughts on the language as an identity marker.

According to Brown (2002), achieving higher levels of education, social mobility and socioeconomic status provide more "code" options that can be switched on and off. For all of the respondents, their surroundings shaped their language. However, some identified a theme of a "black accent." Although they have learned to codeswitch, their translation of SAE has been met with some forms of opposition in the workplace, which is a defining component of their language identity.

Single in Detroit: ...So there was a circumstance where I was actually an intern and I was interviewing different executives and I went and spoke to one woman in particular. ...she felt like I used the word "ask" inappropriately. ....I said it different from the way she would say it and so she did not correct me or say something was wrong at the time. But she later wrote this out in an email to someone that she did not think that I would be a good fit for her department in particular based on that experience. So to me, that's a huge deal because what it says is that I would've missed out on an opportunity for full-time employment in her department if that were the only option I had because of one word I said differently from her...an African American woman pulled me to the side who found out about this and she told me ... so now I became more aware of how I say that word. And so, I say it now more like the, I guess, like you call Standard American English... But, I still think I should say it the way that I normally would and today, I don't feel like either way is right or wrong. I just feel like it is... Like an accent almost, like a black accent, pronouncing that "k." And really neither pronounces the "k." The two ways is "ask" vs "ax," or something like that...

Detroit Resource: ...I actually used to work as a mortgage banker for a company here in Michigan and...just speaking...you know, that was all telephonics. So you know some people that I...it was actually one particular lady I was talking to and she kept trying to correct what I was saying, you know...I was saying the word 'ask' and she kept saying 'ax' and all that stuff. I'm like well; okay I'm asking you a question...

These experiences are relevant to the literature in a couple of ways: (a) BE is unidentifiable to an agent of promotion within Single in Detroit's corporate company and Detroit Resource's customer (Smitherman-Donaldson & van Dijk, 1988; Smitherman, 2006); and (b) Single in Detroit and Detroit Resource pronounced "ask" the way they interpreted its

pronunciation, which was a part of their personal speech style, something everyone has and that carries social value for the speaker and their respective speech community (Berrey, 1993). Furthermore, personal speech style is subject to self and external judgment because of social values we all harbor concerning sociolinguistics (Berrey, 1993). The example Detroit Resource provided here is important because both he and the lady interpreted SAE based on the way they were socialized and their respective language identities. The example is also very similar to Single in Detroit's experience as in intern. Like her, he pronounced "ask" based on his language identity. This is important because in his workplace study, Orbe (1998) identified African Americans who were unable to eliminate certain accents, phrases or speech mannerisms associated with BE or the rural South.

Moreover, the homogenous and strict nature of their workplaces reflects Donahue's (1995) thought that our country's diversity does not necessarily apply to linguistics. This is evident on their account of the encounters with the word "ask." Although they were codeswitching and pronouncing the word the way they interpret it, their pronunciation was not acceptable for someone with major influence because of their social values. Berrey (1993) also adds that people are willing to make communicative judgments that fall below their expected level of conscious awareness.

Through their responses, the interviewees have also validated the notion of their being different "codes" available, just like speech codes theory states. As each of them have entered different stages of their lives, their overall language identity, although still rooted in BE has allowed them to choose these "codes."

Single in Detroit:...I think there are various ways that black people might speak. It's like there's various ways that white people or Hispanic people may speak. So, for me, I have to think about who I actually identify with and, so there is...I would identify with the professional, educated black speech, okay. And it's not, I guess....If I were to go back to my

neighborhood and speak, I would be speaking white, okay or I would be speaking in a way that is not like other, you know, other folks who may not have gone to school...So, I would say that is who I identify with and I don't think that it's a right or wrong thing...I've also been working in a professional environment for a while too, so some of that rubs off on me. And I don't think I sound, white or but any other person but a black person. So, I still have a black dialect and you will know that when you speak to me on the phone or in person. But it's not, it's not slang. Like, I don't think that Black English should be synonymous with slang or inappropriateness....

In this account, Single in Detroit raises a good point about there being different levels of BE. This is important because within in culture, there can be communication variations (Smitherman, 1977). Also, Single in Detroit's reference to being considered as "acting white" if she returned to her old neighborhood is important because those African Americans resistant to using SAE may face this dilemma.

Furthermore, some of the respondents were taught codeswitching in the home, while others learned this indirectly through school and other interactions. For some of the interviewees there was a disconnection from other cultures directly related to immersion in the BE speech community (Rahman, 2008).

Single in Detroit: Okay, that [BE] has been 99% of my exposure growing up. The only exposure I had outside of that would be television. I mean, I didn't really know that other cultures existed when I was in grade school. When I saw someone who didn't look like me, I thought they were a different kind of black person. So, yeah, mostly Black English was my primary exposure growing up. I did have a couple of Caucasian teachers I can recall. But, they spoke in a way that was not unusual to me. I, I would say that they probably grew up around black people as well. So their dialect was very similar to what I was used to. I would say that.

Detroit Resource: You know my parents didn't really have too much influence on the way that I spoke. It was something I always like picked up....I noticed that when they talked to important people, they changed....their voices changed, their speech patterns changed. So, it wasn't necessarily something that they physically said. It was just something that I picked up just growing up.

Overall, like the theoretical framework chapter, these respondents have demonstrated the notion of shared history lending itself to homogenous communication styles. Furthermore, BE

provides a sense of community, belonging and identity, which validates feelings about her culture's language (Rahman, 2008). Their upbringing and exposure to other cultures or lack of shaped the way each of them view their language identity as well as the way they translate SAE. Therefore, especially based on the accounts of Single in Detroit and Detroit Resource, they both pronounced "ask" based on their translations, which is the result of their "black accent."

Although Culture in California was the only one who really had SAE stressed to her, she understood BE and when to use it through her mother's example. Also, the majority of the respondents share the same attitude about effective communication not needing to be identical is consistent with the literature indicating a hegemonic structure within dominant society, specifically corporate America (Jencks & Peterson, 1991). Each has developed an understanding of their work environments, which is validated by Berrey (1993), who says in order to achieve professional success; the new corporate member needs to adopt a speech style more closely related to the organization to reinforce homogeneity. Berrey (1993) cites homogeneity as important because distance (e.g. offices in other cities) can dictate the need for fast and effective communication. Also included is using similar modes of expression to reduce misunderstanding. When discussing BE or "Black Speak" as he calls it, Brown (2002) describes it as not "the truth," but a "truth" for African Americans. This can help explain why African Americans heavily exposed to BE speak it so widely just as other cultures communicate in their own vernacular.

A major implication Single in Detroit's experience revealed is the idea of a "BE accent." Once she graduated from college, she understood the notion of codeswitching; however her pronunciation of certain words still posed a challenge for her in the corporate sector. This is once again consistent with the idea of sociolinguistics, where native speakers display accents when



speaking SAE. Single in Detroit's experience also revealed a limitation in the literature in that this is an idea that has not been researched. As she indicated, corporate America could benefit from co-cultural training including education on BE. Also, further studies could benefit from delving deeper into the impact BE has on African Americans' interpretation of SAE and even other languages.

*RQ2: How can African Americans find a balance between BE and SAE in corporate employment?*

In the corporate workplace, finding a balance between BE and SAE does not have to mean assimilation for African Americans, as commonly assumed. This is something all of the respondents have grown to learn. Again, for members of the BE speech community achieving a communicative balance is about learning to “navigate both worlds “ without compromising their identities. In other words, balance is learning to effectively codeswitch between SAE and BE. By learning how each respondent learned to balance language, further understanding can be gained about potential language resistance and what it means overall.

Single in Detroit: So, I would just say over time, I have just adopted a way to speak just from experiences. And I would say in college, in the way I've had to write papers, in the way that I had to speak with folks who are more educated, you know, other people who I felt were more intelligent. I would admire, like maybe how they speak, the dialect, the words they chose and that has rubbed off on me in a sense. The people who I associate with, you know, as an adult. We speak similarly. We're not, you know, talking in any...we use slang, but it...we know when to use it; we speak appropriately, you know, for the right environment.

Culture in California:...I grew up in a home where my mom was very sort of, you know, academically demanding, if you will. Again, you know, you could hear her speak with her girlfriends and she may not know the language as it is in the song, but you know, I wasn't, I wasn't in shock to hear, 'We'll hook that up' or 'Fa' sho' or 'Yeah, we gon' do that' or I don't know, whatever the language may have been or is at this point... I knew how to communicate with someone slang wise but also I knew how to communicate with someone speaking correctly as we deemed it...

Detroit Automotive: Okay, I grew up in the household with both parents. Both of my parents are retired university professors... I'm the youngest of five – two older brothers, two older

sisters. Interestingly enough, yet speaking Standard English was stressed, but it was not like to a neurotic level. But at the same time my parents did ensure that I understood the King's English and obviously being the child of two teachers, I mean there was a place for grammar and diction and expressing myself clearly, etc. I think that's had a big bearing on my use of the English language.

The foundation Culture in California's mother and Detroit Automotive's parents provided is important because as noted in chapter one, children recognize the socioeconomic advantage of speaking the standard speech of their respective culture by age 10 (Payne, et al., 2000). Although she and her mother are African American, the language use within her home included mostly SAE, which dictated her language use outside of the home. As stated in speech codes, speech communities have in-group (less formal) and out-group (formal and coded) as well as casual (Hecht et al., 2003). On the other hand, Culture in California's upbringing is interesting, because instead of being communicatively casual with her children during their formative years, she went against the norm by being strict. Before knowing what it was, Culture in California had been introduced to "codeswitching" and language balance by her mother's living example. The literature describes having the ability to codeswitch as an important feature for finding balance between BE and SAE (Patillo-McCoy, 1999).

Also, although Detroit Automotive, Single in Detroit and Culture and California come from different backgrounds, all understand the importance of codeswitching. Furthermore, both are comfortable with BE and admittedly use it when comfortable, but have learned when to use it through teachings, examples and trial and error. Here, Culture in California's assertion about people being able to codeswitch is consistent with the idea of sociolinguistics. In other words, we all have a certain way we speak or like she said, be yourself, but understand appropriateness. Again, it is about balance. This is especially important because as Smitherman (2006) states, the language of African Americans is considered inferior by dominant societies around the world.

An educator herself, Culture in California's mother knew the important of reinforcing SAE in her household. SAE is the primary language used for classroom instruction in America and many African American students enter school with a predisposition to BE (Wheeler & Swords, 2004).

Also, in learning language balance, all of the respondents have grown to understand codeswitching does not mean abandoning their true identity or conforming. Instead, they see it as a mechanism for coping in their respective environments.

Single in Detroit: ...We're working for someone, we're getting paid to work for this company, we need to, you know, be productive, be progressive, so in order for us to work well together and to accomplish the goals and the objectives, we need to communicate. So, I don't, I don't think that it has to be, we have to speak the same, we just have to understand one another....

Detroit Resource: At work, you don't have the luxury on having a choice on what to...how to speak, how to say it, how to deliver it, unless you work for yourself. Unless you own your own business. The people you work for have a standard that they want and if they want you to be able to communicate effectively, you know...I used to work in sales. So, in order for you to be in sales, you gotta walk the walk and talk the talk, you know to get results. And if you're not doing it...if you're not communicating effectively, your message then, you not gone (going to) sell and they gone (going to) fire you. So, I think that, you know from being in the workplace, you're forced to conform to however the culture of the business, you know dictates. You don't have a choice to speak how you wanna speak because that's not gone fly in the workplace...

Culture in California: ...You know because there's a way that we will communicate with friends and people we're close with that is fine. But I do think that people need to be skilled in the ability to be able to switch between styles. You see what I'm saying? , I think that, you know, hopefully the culture, especially young people can understand when it's appropriate to use a certain style of speech and when another style is necessary. And it's by no means, means denying who you are or where you come from or what your culture is, your history, your roots, but it's almost...it's like being multilingual really, you know. And while it's really the same language that used differently, you have to understand when it works to advantage to use either style and so my thoughts are it's fine, just know when to use it, when you switch. Codeswitching indeed.

Atlanta Transplant: ....Because at work, there's a certain way you need to carry yourself in corporate America. There's a certain level of professionalism that you need to exude. So, speaking our culture's language in a corporate environment, that's not acceptable so it would stand out to me when I hear it.

The respondents had many communicative similarities in that they are aware of and understand language appropriateness. Furthermore, they have the full capability to codeswitch. An interesting point both made is that although they are fully aware of their language use in all settings, it really depends on comfort. Both tend to relax at work, depending on their audience – white or black. This is so interesting because Patillo-McCoy (2003) indicated such behavior as a middle-class African American exhibiting power or confidence, which both ladies have accomplished through their careers. These responses about overall corporate experiences further validate the inherency of BE for so many African Americans and how its use can pose issues in the corporate sector. In essence, these respondents are great examples of Generation Xers who understands communication balance and as a result, have achieved corporate success without assimilating or compromising their true identities. They also recognize the deficit in corporate America concerning co-cultural communication, which speaks to Allen (2006), who attributes the failure of black and white communication to ignored cultural differences. Such literature suggests the need for additional diversity education and training within corporate sectors.

Although all of the respondents admittedly speak BE, they may not have a full understanding of what it is or appreciation for it, but nonetheless, still manager to balance their usage. Some refer to it is as slang as opposed to their language and others just deem it as flat out improper use of SAE, despite speaking it. In any event, all understand BE is not easily recognizable to key players within corporate America and could easily be misinterpreted.

Detroit Higher Learning: I don't think the professional workplace is conducive to BE. I don't have a problem with BE though. I think there are times when it is okay, like around the water cooler or maybe small office talk.

Detroit Automotive: Ooh, there's stuff that we say that I don't think I want other cultures to hear. Did you ever hear that story about Quentin Terrentino and how he learned black dialect for his movies? He said he spent five hours in jail...

Atlanta Transplant: one of the guys and I mentored young ladies and young men... one of the guys, he was about 22...he came and expressed how he wanted to move up within \_\_\_\_\_ (removed name of company)...he wanted to move up, so he wanted more responsibilities. Well, I was like okay, I'll help you with that but then I catch him around the corner and he's talking to another African American. And he's just like, 'Man, f\*\*\*. That ain't cool. That's not gone (going to) work and I'mma try da' (I'm going to try the)... And it caught my attention because I'm like, well what if I was a VP? And you're looking to move up? You'll never know who's watching, who's paying attention, so I had to work on him even though there is a time and place for everything. You need to be mindful. You need to be...completely know that you are not surrounded by only your culture. Maybe in your department but... Basically, leave that at home, but not in the corporate environment...

Detroit Resource... as an African American, in order to succeed in the corporate world, you have to walk the walk and talk the talk. So, therefore... as a professional in my type of environment, I have to be able to communicate and in order to serve the people that I serve, they're gonna be mostly white. You know whatever. So, therefore, I understand what I need to do in order to succeed so that things are not hard for me to cut off my language or you know the way that I talk outside of work simply because I understand what I have to do in order to succeed...okay, the language may not be better. However, I have to accept the fact that we are of the minority, you know. So, I need to communicate effectively with the people I work with, so...Society forces us to conform in order to succeed ...

Culture in California: ... I think that it's okay to use Black English but I think it's knowing the time and the place. You know, as I meet with prospective students, I'm gonna use....See that, I just used some slang. 'I'm gonna use.' But anyhow, I'm gonna use, Standard American English or Black English and that's even if I'm meeting with a black prospective student. Because I don't take it upon myself to assume that just because this prospective student is black that they would prefer for me to communicate with them....You see what I'm saying, , using slang and again, I would prefer that the black student doesn't assume that because I'm black that I'm going to speak with them using slang. Because it's my professional environment and so when I speak in slang, I choose to speak that way or using Black English, I choose to speak that way with people whom I'm familiar and comfortable, you know. I don't make it my assumption that because we share the same skin color that we can communicate automatically using this language. So in a professional environment, my preferred language is Standard American English just because that's the language that I have to use more often than not.

Atlanta Transplant's example is very interesting in that she was in a position of authority and identified areas where this young man needed improvement to advance, including communication. According to some research, BE can be an impediment in some mainstream corporate environments (Patillo-McCoy, 1999; Smitherman, 2006; Smitherman-Donaldson & van Dijk, 1988). Her example also raises the point about segregation in the workplace. The

department she is responsible for is predominantly African American; however, the executives are not. This is consistent with the literature's assertion that BE remains prevalent due to decades of segregation (Hecht et al., 2003).

Detroit Automotive's explanation about how Quentin Terrentino learned black dialect for his movies is important because it validates what Single in Detroit and Culture in California had to say about exposure affecting our language identity and choices. Furthermore, because Terrentino accessed a prison population filled with African Americans, he was exposed to a distinct speech community for observation. Again, wherever there is a distinct population, there is a distinct speech community (Phillipsen, 2003). Here, Detroit Automotive's thoughts on how African Americans are perceived align with the results of the workplace study by Kirschenman and Neckerman (1991); speaking English in a sophisticated manner is ranked high among sales and customer service-type jobs. Also, his assertion children learn their speech patterns from their parents speaks to language identities. The way we are socialized shapes the way we view the language used. Also, Culture in California's desire for her colleagues to know she is versatile communicatively is important because of the negative perception connected to BE. Those who speak it (BE) have been considered ignorant, lazy, illiterate, slow and low-class (Baron, 2000; Wheeler & Swords, 2002). Also, it shows her ability to, as she puts it, "vacillate between languages."

In addition, Atlanta Transplant's experience with her young employee validates the notion that BE is unidentifiable to the agents of promotion within a corporate company. Also, she was not asking the young man to assimilate, but rather to be mindful of his language use. Other respondents mirror the notion of not sounding identical but making sure you speak intelligently.

Detroit Resource...it's not necessarily the language that they're using but it's them sounding unintelligent with the language. You know, some people try to use big words in the middle of the... they don't even know what it means, you know. Stuff like. When you see stuff like that...that's, that's bad for me. It's not necessarily...when you talk, like, like, you know, what's the guy, the rapper? – TI. TI is a straight hood guy. You can tell he ain't been nowhere outside the confines of ATL, Georgia. Well, since he been [he's been] a rapper but, he talks...even though he talks with a hood and southern drawl, he still sounds intelligent. He's able to put together words and things like that. But when you just hear people like...like when you hear a rap song like 'Shawty, shawty, shawty!' You know, like, stuff like that, you...they don't sound intelligent...

For Detroit Resource, BE is very much a truth, but his exposure to SAE and mainstream culture as an adolescent provided an understanding for the need to codeswitch. His confidence with both dialects makes a powerful statement about his identity and connection to the other culture (Brown, 2002). Detroit Resource is similar to Detroit Automotive in that they both have professional positions with their company but are required to interact with employees from all levels of the business, thus reflecting communication styles. Plus, the communication differences he described are consistent with speech codes in that each department operates as its own community, creating different shared meanings and symbols for communication (Hecht et al., 2003).

Furthermore, Detroit Resource's experience with great exposure to BE early on is consistent with African American children being predisposed to BE at home and in their communities (Craig & Washington, 2004). It also indicates where some resistance can come from being that is the only discourse some African Americans know. Detroit Resource's SAE exposure is very similar to Single in Detroit's in that their living arrangements created detachment from regular exposure to SAE outside of television and school due to segregated-type living (Hecht, et al., 2003). This detachment could also contribute to language resistance for some African Americans.

Also, Detroit Resource's reference to "acting white" is a direct reflection of the literature that says the African American community has a stigma regarding speaking SAE (Godley & Minnici, 2008). Such examples could contribute to resistance to SAE by African Americans hoping to stay connected to their respective speech communities. This experience is a direct reflection of African Americans striving to achieve success and having their "blackness" questioned by family and peers (Tyson et al., 2005). Moreover, this type of discrimination deters many from codeswitching (Tyson et al., 2005).

Detroit Resource's mention of rap music and language chosen in the songs is important because rappers, like many African Americans, feel the need to "keep it real" (Tyson et al., 2005). However, Detroit Resource's description of the rapper T.I. clearly sounding Southern and black, but knowing how to sound intelligent is important because it confirms his, Single in Detroit's and Culture in California's thoughts about speaking clearly, not necessarily identically to the dominant group. Based on his response, achieving balance is about striving to sound intelligent and not, as he put it, adding unintelligent words such as "shawty."

One of the respondents, Atlanta Transplant surfaces how the use of BE could be interpreted by members of the dominant culture, further stressing the need for balance. The respondents in this study understand the need to not fit any specific stereotypes, especially as Gen Xers. They all "speak the part."

Atlanta Transplant...the worse experience that I have had is at my current employer and when a Caucasian takes something that he...he finds on the news or YouTube and it has African American people in it speaking a certain way. And he emails that across to the whole the team and makes fun and you know, makes a comment in reference to how we're speaking. Or, 'look at this, isn't this funny?' Whereas for me, it's not funny because this is my culture and this is how someone African American is expressing them self. You've taken that...but again, it just takes it back to you guys looking down on us and think that we're ignorant and illiterate. So, this is funny to you. But it's not funny to me and even for me, it was really an embarrassment for me; because although this is our culture, again, there's a



proper place and time for that to be shown or displayed. There's still a certain level of character that you need to maintain, period.

Atlanta Transplant's embarrassment from watching the video her colleague sent is a direct result of the stigma of BE being ignorant, illiterate, ghetto and low-class (Baron, 2000; Wheeler & Swords, 2002). Although this example does include one of her colleagues or subordinates speaking BE, it indicates how these Millennials and others could possibly be viewed in her office.

Also, Atlanta Transplant's attitude about not being heard speaking BE on the call center floor is due to people who speak sub-standard speech codes experiencing social isolation, less power and discrimination (Payne et al., 2000). Also, because of her experience in management and the aforementioned incident with the YouTube video, she has a thorough understanding of the need for language balance.

As established earlier, in America every culture has a vernacular. But as the respondents have learned, there is an appropriate time and place for cultural languages of any sort, especially as it relates to the corporate workplace, but she has learned how to comfortably navigate both worlds, if you will. According to Alim (2005), we have to adjust our language to confront the harsh society we live in. There is a study regarding a college classroom at a black college where a white teaching assistant observed BE in action (Boone, 2005). In the study, the assistant recalled members of his community referring to BE as "different," but learned it needed to be accepted or legitimized by a member of another culture before being considered appropriate (Boone, 2003). As a result, for cultural language speakers, balance is important, especially in the corporate office.

*RQ3: Why are some African Americans resistant to using SAE in the corporate workplace?*

As surfaced early on, this is not a time for African Americans to be ambivalent about codeswitching in the corporate workplace, especially if they desire to excel. Furthermore, the literature indicated resistance to speaking SAE among some African Americans, especially Millennials. Again, although the respondents in this study are members of Generation X, their experiences can help give insight into language resistance, especially Atlanta Transplant who works directly with this generation. By reviewing the responses concerning language resistance, a deeper understanding can be gained regarding African Americans' view of SAE in addition to BE.

Culture in California: ...I mean people learn according to how they're...you know, what they're exposed to and so to hear someone using slang doesn't necessarily resonate with me as you're misusing the language, more as, okay, do you know how to vacillate to another style? You know, sort of and were you educated in that regard...I was at a work function once. .... And, I had a coworker who was like, 'Oh yes, I love little bracelets and love little lotions and love little earrings.' She was like 'yeah, I love 'trinklets.' I love 'trinklets.'" You know, I'm like 'trinklets? ...' But in my head, I was like I think you mean, 'trinkets.' I still can hear it, so I guess that's just a case....that's just absolutely using the word incorrectly. And obviously she understood what she was talking about. She knew what a trinket was but she just added an 'l' to it. You see what I'm saying? In those ways, that stands out but the thing of the matter is that she definitely had comprehension, so she understood what she was saying. She just, I don't know, added the....added a letter to it that wasn't necessary. But it's like somebody adding "r" to soda. Where they're like 'sodar.' 'I want some sodar.'

Detroit Automotive: When you talk about blue collar environments, the language is totally different. There's a stress level and quotas that have to be met. A pressure that has to be met. You will be cursed at. I've been cursed at before and I just had to walk away. A lot of what you deal with is uneducated people working on assembly lines but it's a fact of life. It's different. In the corporate, you have college educated people. I gotta tell you. It's interesting, I consider myself to be approachable with people who work in the cafeteria. Like the custodial staff. I speak to them but there's always this weird place, where I get into a conversation, is it going to be Standard American English or Black English? I think a lot of people in the workplace come from, 'How real is he being?' I do feel like I get a little weird reaction from the African American custodial staff. Recently, I was walking and talking with my boss near them and I was not using Black English in the conversation. They give weird reactions to Standard American English...

Single in Detroit: ...the dominant culture in this society is what folks are going to look to be more like, I suppose...Something is wrong with you if you are not like the dominant group. So I don't think that it's....that the term....I have not heard the term Black English very often, but it's something that definitely deserves more attention because there is a difference. And it's not because we're stupid or dumb, I think. ...I would just want to be more accepted for, the way that I am, you know, and not be labeled with that being slang, wrong, black or white. But, just that there are...there are differences in the way we speak and it's not, they're not because of lack of education or anything. It really is just because of our upbringing and our history, that we're gonna speak differently. Like any other culture. That's not a black thing. That's not a white thing. That's just an experience, a life experience and I think that your language will also change over time, you know... So, yeah, society has a way to come overall. And I think that we're all part of that by just not conforming and not just trying to blend in but to rather shoot for being understood and be an advocate for educating people to understand that it's not...I don't need to say the words the same way that you do. Is it, is it correct...am I using correctly, is it you understand me? Am I communicating well and effectively to you...?

Culture in California's response is similar to one Single in Detroit had in that she speaks SAE the way she interprets it as well her colleague. This is consistent with the literature when it states that a child who speaks in a vernacular dialect is not speaking incorrectly, but in the language of the home discourse community (Wheeler & Swords, 2004). In addition, as previously stated, every culture has its own form of dialect or language, meaning individuals speak accordingly, whether it is SAE or their native tongue (Hecht, et al., 2003). For Culture in California's colleague, "trinklets" was completely acceptable and although Culture in California wanted to correct her, she understood what she was saying in the end.

Some African Americans may appear to be resistant to SAE in the corporate environment because of BE being inherent but are really just unaware of their language until someone surfaces it an issue. Also, because BE is inherent for so many, there is resistance because it is a part of their overall language identity. Culture in California made the same assertion as Single in Detroit in that two individuals may be speaking differently, but the most important aspect is mutual understanding. Furthermore, the example she provided about her colleague is consistent

with there being a communicative gap between cultural groups given different assignment of meanings and symbols to words (Nixon & Dawson, 2002).

Culture in California...I think that there is no commonality within the black community around what's acceptable, how we should speak, how we shouldn't speak. I think that there's still strong, this large gap between what a professional black person sounds like versus what an unprofessional black person sounds like. You know what I'm saying? So, there's no common area. We don't discuss it enough. So, I would say that the worse experience might be trying to discuss with someone why I don't speak white but that it's just that I've gone to school and I don't need to speak the way that I used to when I was 17....

Atlanta Transplant:...coming from... California, you have so many different cultures, so many different languages that, ....I guess everybody just had a certain way that they raised their family or raised their children and taught them to speak a certain way for the environment structure....And, I could say, maybe it's because it's the West. You have this certain image so you don't want to seem retarded or ghetto or uneducated, whereas in the South, where I noticed that it is predominately...and I would say specifically Atlanta, Georgia, where it's predominately...it's still such a divided state in regards to white and black and what I do know is that the African American culture here....aren't really as pressed with teaching their children how to speak correctly and how to properly interact with other cultures and be able to socialize within any environment. And, it's almost as if they're teaching them to stick strictly to predominately black culture as opposed to broadening our horizons to understand and learn how to interact with other cultures.

Culture in California's recollection raises the point that there is a large gap between what is acceptable and unacceptable in the black community, which helps provide an understanding regarding the resistance to SAE. As stated before, the need to reject the dominant discourse/way of a life is a factor for many African Americans (Darity & Castellino, 2005). This desire to "keep it real" is the reason some of Single in Detroit's peers from her old neighborhood have questioned her language evolution. Also, Atlanta Transplants makes some very interesting points here regarding language differences in different cities. The segregated-type culture she describes in Atlanta has created a lack of communicative concern and a sense of resistance to SAE. As indicated in the literature, the importance of gaining mainstream access for professional jobs is not being stressed (Jencks & Peterson, 1991).

Culture in California's assertion is also important because it correlates with Woolard and Schieffelin (1994), who link language to the following: group and personal identity, aesthetics, morality and epistemology. In other words, language equates to being human being and in a sense, individualistic, given it is a part of one's identity. Culture in California's thoughts are also important because according to Botan and Smitherman (1991), it is important to be conversant in SAE for high-level jobs. In addition, Culture in California's thoughts are consistent with Brown's (2002) argument about education leading to more sophisticated language use.

Detroit Resource: There's a phenomenon called 'talking white.' So, when people say, 'Oh, you talk like a white boy.' You know, it's one of those type of things. So, I did notice that when I....because I moved at like a pivotal age...I think like seventh or eighth grade is like pivotal, you know, development as a person...I was very impressionable....I just wanted to be happy. So, I noticed that when I would go home, my grandmother and my mother, 'oh you sound like a white boy.' You know, stuff like that. And so I did notice that a little difference in the way I talked just from being around, you know, the kids that I went to school with. So, you know, I think that's the just the phenomenon ...the more times you're around people, that's the way you sound, that's the way you talk.

Detroit Resource's thoughts here are similar to Single in Detroit's in that the view the corporate workplace as a place of conformity. Although neither one considers themselves to be "sell-outs," they understand their language use needs to be conducive to their respective work environments. Furthermore, as they both have surfaced regarding the culture of their business, speaking the dominant discourse is imperative for access to corporate employment and business opportunities (Payne et al., 2000). In addition, BE is not an identifiable form of communication to agents of promotion within a company (Smitherman, 2006). These are important points for the African American looking to achieve language balance. Additionally, these accounts are prime examples of African Americans viewing a member of their culture as "acting white" for choosing to codeswitch (Tyson, et al., 2005). It also is the reason some members of the younger generation choose not to codeswitch because they want acceptance from their peer group.

Detroit Resource's experience directly speaks to the notion of not just "looking the part," but "speaking the part" as well. Also, like the other respondents, his experience does not speak to complete resistance, but his answers are consistent with the idea of not speaking identically, but coherently. However, although Detroit Resource has not been resistant to speaking SAE, the criticism he received from his family is an example of how some African Americans, particularly younger ones, may be. Again, like the others, his responses indicate the need for more research concerning cultural language and accents.

All of the respondents have indicated their language is based on surrounding influences such as family, work and community. Another major influence on language is music. Rap/Hip-hop, which is one of the most popular forms of music to African Americans, especially Gen Xers and Millennials is filled with BE. It is so influential that as the literature stated, common rap phrases and terms have transcended into mainstream society – television, commercials and movies. Young children are growing up listening to this type of music and many have the language reinforced in the home and their surrounding communities.

Culture in California: I'm just not sure with this music these days. How you're allowed to sing and rap, particularly rap not speaking well. And you have babies, who are then learning these songs and because these are the first words they're hearing, they're thus beginning to think that's it okay to speak in such a manner...it's just that's a tragic experience for me the most because we're not allowing our minds to expand enough to be able to identify other words to speak or communicate or express ourselves just as clearly and as strongly...But I just think that, you know, some of us are just lazy language learners and lazy speakers, unfortunately so we resort to slang and bad words to allow us to get by. But it's just unfortunate because we have some kids, some babies who are growing up whose parents barely have a decent or sufficient command of the English language and then listening to music that isn't very healthy and so this becomes the child's first exposure...

Culture in California's mention of rap music is important because as previously stated, she is a Gen Xer, which is also known as the Hip-Hop generation. Because of her generation and knowledge of rap, she has identified a clear connection between the music and language

resistance for members of the younger generation. As stated in the literature, for many African Americans, especially Millennials, hip-hop is extremely influential, especially on their communication (Dyson, 2007). Again, this example is important because hip-hop seems to set a code for the community, which many adhere to (Morrell, 2002). Again the literature states that African American youth are predisposed to BE in their homes and communities, often times without the exposure of codeswitching (Craig & Washington, 2004). Moreover, this answers the question about African Americans being resistant to SAE because there is the perception of not misusing language, but speaking the way it is interpreted.

Having a corporate-type position of authority, Atlanta Transplant has firsthand experience with the effect of language in the workplace. Furthermore, her position of authority required the need for codeswitching ability, providing her with increased language awareness and the need for balance. Without the experience of higher education, Atlanta Transplant climbed the corporate ladder in two major metropolitan cities, giving her additional insight into language some of the other respondents do not have, especially as it concerns members of the younger generation.

... Well, this kind of goes to mentoring the...the young adults ...just teaching them because they're coming through the door....and they're coming through the door...not with the mindset of 'I need to be professional.' But with the mindset of 'I gotta job.' So, "I gotta job so I'm just gone (going to) be me, I gotta a job, so I'm just go do the job and be me.' Well, you need to enhance you and you need to step you up. So, you know, I definitely have to. I would pull people aside all day long... As African American women and men, this is not how we carry ourselves. That's not how we speak. You know, you don't know another word? Get a dictionary. Start learning new words but that's not now we speak. We don't speak like that in front of others. We speak like that amongst ourselves but not in front of others (non-African Americans).

What Atlanta Transplant is saying here is important because she is not telling her African American employees to abandon their language, but simply to learn how to codeswitch. BE is a

“truth” for African Americans, but not the mainstream agents of power in their call center (Brown, 2002).

Atlanta Transplant: ...I would see them [young African American employees] trying. I would see them catching and correcting themselves. So, they were trying but they had not gotten to a point where they knew when to turn it on and when to turn it off, but they were trying to get got that point. But it takes some time...If no one has ever taught you.

This is important because again, many African Americans are predisposed to BE in their homes and communities without learning about codeswitching (Craig & Washington, 2004). In some instances, this predisposition is often translated as resistance because the respective speakers do not know any better.

Atlanta Transplant:...the majority of the ones that I mentored are the ones that I hired. The ages ranged from 19 to about 27 .... The job interviews were horrible...Their language, their communication was unacceptable within the job interview. Yet, I hired them anyway. One reason why I hired them was to give them the opportunity to learn because it was evident in the interview that no one had taught them or no one had been teaching them; in showing them how they need to conduct themselves, so I felt it was they were placed there for a reason. So, this was an opportunity for me as a black woman to assume a position to be able to take them under my wings and teach them so that they will know going forward, the next time, the next interview...I hired them so that I could teach them because it was evident that no one had.

What Atlanta Transplant strived to do here is honorable to note because her colleagues were resistant to take a chance with the interviewees due to their language and like Allen (2006) claims, most people learn their communication styles and rules based on racial group membership and socialization. Fortunately, unlike some African American Millennials, these individuals were not resistant to her mentoring as the research indicates (Smitherman, 2006; Townsel, 1997).

Atlanta Transplant:... these were actually African American colleagues and during their interviews, because as managers, we all interviewed...they would come out and say, ‘Oh no, that person did not speak correct English’ or ‘they didn’t know how to answer the question.’ ...and they would laugh about it sometimes. And they would be like, ‘Well clearly he didn’t’ think he was going to get hired here; in a job where you have to talk to customers and he speaks like that.’ You know, they did not see it in the manner that I saw



it. Unfortunately, some people get in a certain position and they tend to look down and feel everybody needs to always be where there are. Whereas, sometimes people have to grow and you have to teach them...with them [colleagues] not hiring, I was hiring.

This is an interesting example because the hiring agents are African American. However, they have adopted the hegemonic mindset of their environment and denying those who do not speak the dominant discourse access to their corporate employment (Payne et al., 2000). Had Atlanta Transplant not given these individuals a chance, they possibly would not have learned their language was inappropriate in the corporate workplace, which again, could appear as resistance due to ignorance. Plus, this very example is referenced in the literature, where an African American stands a great chance of being misunderstood or discriminated against by an employer (Jencks & Peterson, 1991).

Again, Atlanta Transplant's experience is different than the other Gen Xers included in this study in that she is not college-educated and achieved a position of authority by working her way up within her company. However, similar to Detroit Automotive, her position of authority allowed her to see the impact of "looking and speaking the part" in the corporate sector. Like the others, she is not denying the existence of BE or trying to completely conform, but understands the hegemonic structure of the corporate environment and a need for language balance, which dictates a need to speak in a certain manner.

Atlanta Transplant's specific experience does not speak to resistance but unlike the others, she encountered Millennials who on the surface, appeared to be resistant to SAE to her African American colleagues. Her responses revealed how a willingness to show language concern could make a gradual difference with individuals who appear resistant to speak SAE. Also, although the other respondents admittedly speak BE even if they do not know how to define it, Atlanta Transplant is more in tune with her culture's language and the history;

something that contributed to her understanding of balance and codeswitching. Atlanta Transplant's experience with language in different cities gave her an awareness and tolerance her colleagues lacked. Based on Atlanta Transplant's perception of language in the South, her responses also indicate the need for diversity training among corporate executives and hiring agents with the company.

Again, all of the respondents admittedly speak BE, but most do not know or understand its history. Other than knowing it is a manner in which members of their culture choose to speak, with the exception of Culture in California, they do not know the origin or even regard it as an actual language for that matter

Detroit Higher Learning: Black English is not a real language, so it's just something that we've accepted and something that we just kind of roll with and just go with the flow. So, I think that it's extremely important that people know the correct way to speak and if you want to be relaxed and speak a different way, that's fine, just know when and where to do it.

Again, Detroit Higher Learning shares the same sentiment as Detroit Automotive, Single in Detroit, Atlanta Transplant and Detroit Resource regarding there being a time and place for BE. His notion that African Americans just "roll with" BE and make language our own implies there is a "truth" to sharing this cultural experience even though he does not understand the history (Brown, 2002).

### ***Discussion of Findings***

Based on the aforementioned findings, a few issues have been surfaced regarding how African Americans view "their language" and how they choose to use it, specifically in the corporate workplace. All of the respondents are self-admitted BE speakers, whether they can define it or not. They were all in agreement that their upbringings and the direct and indirect messages received about BE set their communicative foundations. While some had SAE and the

idea of codeswitching taught them early on, all of the respondents have experienced changes in language with age and different personal associations as well as environments.

Something many of the respondents indicated, which has not been addressed by the literature, is the idea of there being a “black accent.” Several of them stated they pronounce certain words based on their interpretation, which is a common phenomenon with any cultural language speaker. However, with the debate about BE being a legitimate language, it is not surprising this is not something that has been researched. Nonetheless, it is something worth researching further given the history and prevalence of BE in the African American culture.

In essence, the aim was to look for resistance to speaking SAE in the corporate sector among African Americans. However, the findings did not indicate resistance as expected, but provided a new perspective. All of these respondents were Gen Xers, who as a result of the Baby Boomer parents and experiences had an understanding of language balance. However, their responses showed how language difference could be interpreted as resistance by the dominant group and those in powerful corporate positions, such as Atlanta Transplant’s African American colleagues. Although resistance does exist among some African Americans, for others, their language balance ignorance could be interpreted that way. As the respondents indicated, the corporate workplace can be viewed as a place of conformity, which means language use different than the “norm” is sometimes subject to question, as in the cases with Single in Detroit and Detroit Automotive.

The responses of all of the respondents have indirectly indicated a need for research on “black accents.” As Culture in California, Detroit Resource and Single in Detroit indicated, effective communication is not necessarily about speaking identically, but simply about being coherent and articulate. Additionally, they have indirectly indicated a need for additional

education regarding BE within the African American community. Detroit Higher Learning indicated he did not believe BE was a real language, but said he just “rolls with it.” Also, Detroit Automotive’s reference to SAE as the “King’s English” reveals the disparity in the way he views his “language” although he admittedly codeswitches regularly. These experiences indicates the need for further education regarding the history of BE, especially for African Americans. In this vein, BE is viewed as synonymous with slang, although literature has proven it is not. This is something the African American community needs to be educated on in order to further achieve language balance. Overall, all of the respondents understand the language environments of their respective workplaces and have learned to speak accordingly without compromising their identities, but are fully aware of the language disparities in existence.

## CHAPTER 6 DEFINING MOMENTS

Speech codes theory definitely rang true for all of the respondents as each indicated that BE is inherent for many members of this cultural speech community. However, they all agreed that its use should be limited in the corporate workplace initially, especially those that are predominately white. For the respondents, SAE is considered to be a universal language, as indicated by the “standard” denotation. All of the respondents in this study have achieved corporate success, of course by their education and ability, but also because they have learned the value of codeswitching in their respective positions. For some it was simple and others their corporate communicative journey was more difficult. For example, Single in Detroit who pronounced “ask” the way she understands it but was looked over for a position by a person of power for that reason. Had it not been for a mentor approaching her about the “issue,” she may have faced the same problem again. Although they have achieved codeswitching success, some have received discrimination from other African Americans. Such is the case with Detroit Automotive who often receives odd looks from the janitorial staff when they hear him speak; or Atlanta Transplant who decided to give young Millennials jobs despite their inability to codeswitch, unlike her colleagues.

Moreover, speaking BE in the office is more acceptable once credibility has been established between the BE speaker and the “powers that be.” Additionally, some of the respondents are fine with its usage in the workplace, but felt it should be restricted to other members of their speech communities and in relaxed locations such as the lunch room or water cooler. To that effect, all admitted to speaking BE in the workplace with trusted colleagues and clients, once comfortable with the settings and confident in their positions.

Additionally, although all of the respondents believe BE is inherent for many African Americans, their answers implied that SAE gives you credibility with outsiders of this speech community. Furthermore, there was an almost unanimous thought that African Americans still need to work hard to prove themselves in this country, which again surfaces the idea of “navigating both worlds.” Perception was a major theme prevalent throughout the interviews as the interviewees indicated how BE speakers can be perceived as less knowledgeable to those unfamiliar with this language. Also, the participating respondents agreed that other African Americans often view them negatively when they speak SAE. As indicated earlier, they have been labeled as “acting white” or “talking white.” Through speaking with each of the respondents and analyzing the interview transcripts, there is an understanding that BE is prevalent in the African American speech community but there is a looming negative perception by insiders and outsiders of the speech community.

Earlier, it was surfaced that a group of people must know where they came from before they can really succeed. For this group, all seem to have an awareness of the hegemonic structure of their workplaces, which prompts them to govern themselves accordingly with language, especially those in management-type positions. Although the respondents in this study have developed the need for language-use balance in the corporate sector, the data suggests there is overall reckless use of language. By this it is suggested the lack of knowledge concerning BE as a whole has contributed to members of this speech community having an overall misunderstanding of language use as a whole. Not only are most African Americans uneducated on their own language, they also do not understand SAE, which has contributed to this wide inability and unwillingness to codeswitch by many Millennials.

Also, as mentioned before and as the data suggests, African Americans seem to continue the “Self-hating prophecy,” where anything associated with this cultural group is automatically viewed as negative. Communication is not exempt from this prophecy. For example, all of the respondents admitted to speaking BE but some of them considered it as sub-standard, broken and made up slang. Why speak something you consider sub-standard? This is a legitimate question anyone could ask but the language is spoken because despite the negative view, it is familiar for so many. Again, it is a “truth.”

## CHAPTER 7 LIMITATIONS/OBSERVATIONS

One of the major limitations for gathering the data was the use of only members of Generation X given then their great theoretical codeswitching ability. Future studies would benefit greatly from looking at how Baby Boomers and Millennials fare under the same communicative circumstances. Another limitation was the tape recorder even though it was necessary and convenient. Although each respondent was informed of its existence and consented to being recorded, it made some of them nervous, especially those interviewed in person. At times, respondents would stare at the recorder when answering questions instead of me. Or, they would make references to the recorder such as “Oh, I don’t know if I should say that because this is being recorded” or “I know I probably sounded silly.” Additionally, it made some of the in-person interviewees nervous, which was indicated by fidgeting, sighing at the sight of the recorder and awkward laughter. Also, for the two interviews conducted via phone, it was difficult listening to the interviews, which had to be played back numerous times in order to transcribe. This is especially true since my voice often transmitted louder than the respondents, but fortunately copious notes and headphones aided this process.

For future studies, it will probably be best to find a way to mask the view of the recorder so interviewees will feel more comfortable. According to Weiss (1994), “Tape recorders remind people there will be a record of what they say” (pg. 53). Plus, having to conduct the interviews over the phone for the two who live in different states was also a limitation because I could not make eye contact and observe body language. Furthermore, both respondents were using cell phones, which broke up at times, delaying answers. For Culture in California, the signal became such a problem, she had to call me back from her landline (fortunately she is one of few people who still have one).



When analyzing the data, it was surprising to find no outright resistance on the part of the respondents as expected. All had no issue with codeswitching, but instead had an issue with being expected to sound identical to mainstream society, which could be misconstrued as resistance or inability to negotiate communicatively. Such information was evident in the majority of the data provided by the respondents. However, although most of the respondents gave very in depth response to the interview questions, some data was inconsistent with the designated research questions. This data was purposely excluded, but would be useful for any future studies on BE and its broader impact on language as a whole. For example, Detroit Resource provided an example regarding coded language he and a good friend share, which was incoherent to a colleague who overheard a conversation. Although they were not speaking BE, his example could speak to how cultural languages can confuse “outsiders.”

With the exception of Detroit Higher Learning, each responded comfortably alternated between BE and SAE during their interview. Also, Detroit Automotive who indicated he feels African Americans are often too loud seemed to compensate by speaking very quietly. As a result, I often had to ask him to repeat himself and had to watch his lips intently.

Also, as indicated by Weiss (1994), if a respondent does not wish to respond, he or she is not going to answer more cooperatively because of a question’s wording. Some of the interviewees provided much more data than could be used such as Culture in California, Detroit Resource and Single in Detroit. However, Detroit Automotive and Detroit Higher Learning were not as forthcoming and gave the most minimal answers they could muster. For Detroit Automotive, it could have been the fact that he had a long day prior to the interview and was not feeling well. Also, there should have been a “no-cell phone” rule for the in-person interviews as there were a few interruptions due to ringing devices.

## CONCLUSION

While this study of BE in the corporate sector was not exhaustive, it provided a cross-section of the effects of cultural communication in the workplace. I chose the title “Speaking the Part – Is Black English in the Workplace a Detriment to Climbing the Corporate Ladder?” because job seekers often times go to great lengths to look good for interviews. They purchase specific-colored suits, new shoes and develop a conservative look in order to impress hiring agents. However, this transformation needs to include communication as well. As the research and data have revealed, people can look professional but lose all credibility and respect to those who matter based on communication barriers. To that effect, BE in the workplace is a detriment if misused as the respondents have indicated by codeswitching and being aware of who is around while speaking culturally.

This study is not suggesting anyone should be ashamed of or abandon their cultural language. Every group has some sort of distinct culture but those seeking entry and promotion in corporate America need to be prepared for a homogenous environment, where individual cultural languages are not celebrated or necessarily encouraged. Hopefully, this study will provide insight into the effect of communication in the corporate sector for Black English as well as other cultural languages for other marginalized groups. Moreover, this study suggests the great need for a better understanding of BE. Only one of the respondents referred to BE as “BE,” whereas the others called it “slang” or “broken English.” If African Americans do not understand their cultural language, certainly outsiders will be further confused by it, as they have been. In addition, if African Americans do not understand and respect their own language, they cannot expect not to experience discrimination, exclusion and questions from outsiders of the speech community.

In the future, more studies need to be conducted about the effect of cultural languages in corporate workplaces, especially as it relates to the interview process and promotions within the company. Also, additional studies about the communicative benefit of cultural diversity training for corporate companies would aid the discipline in providing job preparedness for individuals struggling with the idea of codeswitching. Furthermore, communication studies need to be conducted about the lack of history regarding cultural languages and the negative effect it has on speech communities, specifically African Americans.

Further examinations of a study of this type would be strengthened with researchers actually entering corporate offices and observing communicative exchanges with Black English speakers and their colleagues – African American and other cultures. An observation of this type would allow communication scholars to gain first-hand knowledge of the effect of cultural languages in historical hegemonic structures.

The data and the research indicate an unequal professional expectation between cultures in corporate America. This evidenced by cases and feelings of discrimination as well as studies such as this. Again, the American job market is changing significantly and communicative marketability is a must. Furthermore, evidence has shown that the American demographics are also changing, meaning more studies need to take a look at how this affecting the traditional hegemonic structure of discussions in corporate boardrooms across the country.

## APPENDIX A INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Background

1. One area I would like to explore is how our childhoods influence our communicative identities. Talk to me about the structure of your household growing up – parents, siblings, where you grew up, etc.
2. Talk to me about the kind of messages you received from your parents about language while growing up.
  - a. What kind of exposure did you have to Black English?
  - b. What kind of exposure did you have to Standard American English?
  - c. What kind of language would you say your parents (mother/father) used while you were growing up?
  - d. What were your experiences in school concerning language?

### Cultural Issues

3. I am particularly interested in how our culture shapes the way we speak and interact with others. Recall for me the first time you noticed a difference in the way cultures speak?
  - a. Did you ever have anyone question you about your language?
  - b. If you had to describe our culture's language use to another culture, what would you say?
  - c. What are your thoughts about your culture's language use?
  - d. Describe a time when you felt someone within your own culture misused language.
  - e. What do you believe society's beliefs about our culture's language are?
  - f. What is the worst inter-cultural experience (different) you have had with language?
  - g. What is the worst intra-cultural (same) experience you have had with language?
  - h. What are your thoughts when you are speaking culturally with other African Americans and other cultures are within earshot?
  - i. Have you had to explain yourself to someone because of language?

### Professional Workplace

4. I am also very interested in how the way we speak impacts our communicative interaction in professional settings. What are your thoughts concerning language in the professional workplace – BE and SAE.
  - a. Think about the first time you went on a professional job interview. What was the communicative exchange like?
  - b. Have you ever felt inclined to counsel other professional African Americans about their language use? If so, why?

- c. What do you think about the way language is structured in the corporate workplace vs. blue-collar environments?
- d. What was it like navigating language between work and home?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS**

The respondents chosen for this study represent the following demographic makeup.

Single in Detroit is 29-years-old and was born and raised in Detroit. She graduated from a Michigan university and works as a financial risk analyst for a major automotive corporation.

Mr. Detroit Automotive is 40-years old. He was born and raised in Louisiana and works for a major automotive company in Detroit.

Mr. Detroit Higher Learning is 28-years-old and was born and raised in Detroit. He works as a financial aid officer for a major Michigan university.

Mr. Detroit Resource is 28-years-old and was born and raised in metro Detroit, attended a major Michigan university and works in human resources.

Ms. Atlanta Transplant is 37-years-old and currently lives in Atlanta. Previously she works as a manager for a national telecommunications company and as a professional make-up artist.

Ms. Culture in California is 30-years-old and was born and raised in Los Angeles. She works in and admissions and financial aid the school of social work at a major Los Angeles university.

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**ABSTRACT****SPEAKING THE PART - IS BLACK ENGLISH IN THE WORKPLACE A DETRIMENT  
TO CLIMBING THE CORPORATE LADDER? A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY  
REGARDING BLACK ENGLISH IN THE WORKPLACE****by****KANIKA N. JACKSON****August 2011****Advisor:** Dr. Donyale Padgett**Major:** Communication Studies**Degree:** Master of Arts

This study aims to explore how African Americans who speak Black English (BE), particularly members of Generation X, function communicatively in corporate America, where the dominant language spoken is Standard American English (SAE). Much of the literature theorized African Americans as being resistant to speaking SAE in mainstream settings in fear of compromising their identities or “acting white.” Using in-depth interviews with six African Americans across the country who work in corporate America, this study examines their lived communicative experiences in the workplace and how they learned language balance (the ability to codeswitch).

With data compiled into case studies and analyzed using cross-case synthesis, the research yielded the results of six African Americans who have learned the art of codeswitching between BE and SAE in corporate America without compromising their identities.

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Kanika Nicole Jackson received her bachelor's degree in Communication/Public Relations from California State University, Fullerton in Fullerton, California. She is currently receiving her master's degree in Communication Studies from Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. She formerly worked in marketing and public relations at a firm in the greater Los Angeles area and metro Detroit. This summer, she will be teaching a basic speech course at Concordia University, Ann Arbor. She resides in Detroit with her husband and is a soon-to-be first-time mother.